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A MINE OF WEALTH.

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A MINE OF WEALTH

BY

ESMÈ STUART

AUTHOR OF

'MARRIED TO ORDER,' 'A WOMAN OF FORTY,'
'KESTELL OF GREYSTONE,' ETC.

'The faery power
Of unreflecting love.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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A MINE OF WEALTH.

CHAPTER I.

THE WIDOW.

THE evening light was fading when Mrs. Beddoes folded up some work she was doing for the poor, and came to warm her feet by the bright fire which was lighting up her small but pretty drawing-room. As she stood thus close to the mantel-piece mirror, she looked at herself with a quiet scrutiny which denoted that she had a purpose in her gaze. She saw before her a very pretty woman, though pretty was not

Gen. de. Recy
1827
Mantel-piece = 307

1827-28, 1828-29

quite the right word to use about Lucy Beddoes, for her good looks were of a high order. If she was not beautiful as some understand the expression, her face and her features were very nearly perfect. Above all, she belonged to a womanly type of womanhood, so that part of her charm lay in her movements, in the softness of her voice, in the slow lifting of her rather large and drooping eyelids, in the whiteness and shapeliness of her hands, in fact in all that goes to make up a charming woman. But there was an evident want of animation about her, easily accounted for, however, by the sight of a minute widow's cap. This sign of mourning added to her attraction, and also accounted for an occasional dreamy manner apparent even in the midst of such cheerful company as Willington could produce.

The *élite* of this small country town had

taken great interest in Mrs. Beddoes when she first came with her young daughter to live amongst them. They looked out her late husband in the Army list, and heard that she was well born. They also found that she had spent her married life in following what is called 'the tail of the army,' and now that Captain Beddoes was dead she had but a slender income and wished to live quietly. Of course, they said, the widow would marry again. A few affirmed that she was a great flirt for all her quiet, gentle ways, and that she was longing for a husband, but though gossips talked, no one could find out that Mrs. Beddoes ever made a false step. She never received gentlemen unless a well-recognized chap-eron was with her, and she never missed a Sunday service.

The tide of gossip then turned of its own accord, and made Mrs. Beddoes into a saint.

In five years she certainly could have found somebody to marry had she so wished ; that she had not done so proved her right to be canonized. Woodbine Villa became the favourite resting-place of the vicar and of his curates, and, what was still more meritorious, Mrs. Beddoes became the friend of the vicar's wife and the sweet counsellor of all the curates who had love affairs.

Two astute ladies once remarked that ' Mrs. Beddoes was very sweet and gentle, but that she was very hard to know.' ' You never got further with her,' as they expressed it, and ' considering that she had only one child it was strange that the girl was so little with her mother.' For their pains, however, the rest of the Willingtonians called them ' uncharitable,' and Mrs. Beddoes, soon after the enunciation of their suspicious remarks, heaped coals of

fire upon their heads by coming to nurse the younger sister through an attack of low fever. After this the elder made *amende honorable* by confessing to her benefactor the disparaging remarks she had once pronounced against her.

‘As to Sara, I know appearances *are* against me,’ said Mrs. Beddoes, lifting her drooping lids. ‘You were quite right to think so; I wonder everybody doesn’t say it, but I don’t want to sadden the child’s young life with the shadow of my sorrow. She is so high-spirited, so young, and she loves the country and her uncle’s house so much. Also she is devoted to her cousins, and with me the child is so lonely. I always felt that I must not be a selfish mother. I knew what the world would say of me, but——’

‘But you are a saint,’ exclaimed Miss Woolley. ‘I know it *now*.’

In this way Mrs. Beddoes's last enemy was conquered. People in their senses could not believe that anyone would sit up for six nights running simply for effect.

This evening, just as Mrs. Beddoes had once more ascertained from the evidence of the looking-glass that she was still pretty and still young-looking, that her figure was still slight and that her hair was not grey, and lastly that her blue eyes still looked most bewitching in their softness, the door-bell rang.

A slightly hard yet expectant look succeeded the widow's smile as she awaited the entrance of the maid. Her taper fingers instinctively arranged her cap-pin, and then smoothed down the long folds of her black dress. On the card which was brought in to her she read the name of Profitt. It was unknown to her, and it caused her a momentary frown trying to

recollect if she had ever met a gentleman of that name. When her visitor entered, she gave a mental start. Before her stood a stout man with unmistakable signs of the law surrounding his waistcoat and his whiskers. Mrs. Beddoes cordially disliked lawyers, but after bowing she politely pointed to a seat, expecting to hear of some forgotten debt left by her late husband. Her eyes were slowly raised to Mr. Profitt's face, and she said, softly,

‘I do not think I have the pleasure of knowing you.’

‘No, madam; but I have come on important business which——’

‘Indeed, I know very little of business.’

Mr. Profitt spoke in small, thin tones quite out of proportion with his ample figure.

‘You must often have needed counsel,’ he said.

Mrs. Beddoes drooped her eyelids, thinking, 'Who is this man, and what does he want?'

'I need it still.'

'My dear madam, if in the future I can be of any service to you, or to your daughter, I assure you that it will give me the utmost pleasure to——'

'Thank you.' She raised her eyes quickly this time. 'Are you bringing me bad news?'

'Bad news! Ah, ah!' said the tiny voice boxed up in the large body. 'No, indeed, pray be reassured. Perhaps I should have written to you, but in these cases it is best to speak face to face with your clients.'

Mrs. Beddoes thought, 'It is bad news, and he wants to break it gently to me. Horrid man!'

'It is much better to speak face to face.'

‘Thank you exceedingly for your consideration.’ She folded her hands, and waited.

‘I believe you have a daughter. Is she here?’

‘My daughter, Sara, is at school; at least, at this moment she is spending her Easter holidays with her uncle in Shropshire, but she is coming home to-day.’

‘How old is she? Excuse my seeming curiosity, but——’

‘She is twenty; at least, she is past twenty. I wanted her to have the advantage of a good education before she faced the world. I am not rich, and Sara will have to earn her own living. Has anyone left me a legacy?’ The idea suddenly entered her head, and for once Mrs. Beddoes asked a direct question.

‘I am sorry to say no. For some unexplained reason, the lawyer’s letter I

received informs me that you are passed over, and that the . . . the legacy is settled upon your daughter on the day that she comes of age. I should like to see her, because——’

A pink flush spread over the widow’s fair oval face.

‘Who has left Sara a legacy?’ she said.

‘A certain Mr. Frank Ferrars.’

‘My husband’s cousin was a rolling stone. I suppose he had not much money to leave.’ Mrs. Beddoes drew a sigh of relief. Her thoughts had not turned at all towards this unknown connection.

‘Yes, certainly a rolling stone, but the strange part is that these rolling stones at times, my dear madam, refuse to be ruled by proverbs. Two years before his death Mr. Ferrars was in Australia and had a lucky chance.’

‘Indeed?’ said the widow, lifting her eyes towards the lawyer’s rubicund face.

Mr. Profitt fell a victim at once. Here was a woman who was not in the least excited by the word fortune.

‘Yes, Mr. Ferrars was on his last legs, as people say, when really quite a romantic episode befell him. His last penny was already spent in tobacco as he was walking with his rough but worthy friend, Jethro Cobbin, discussing what could save them from starvation, when he struck his mining tool into the ground where the two had sat down to smoke their last pipe—or so they thought. Frank Ferrars was not a fool though he had been unlucky, he knew the colour of gold. He did not tell even his friend, but he went to the nearest township, borrowed money, and bought up the claim, which no one wanted, and then made his

friend a present of a third of the claim and a third of the profits, of course on certain conditions. Jethro Cobbin had soon reason to bless his chum, and though the news has only just reached England, the partners had already made a large fortune. The excitement of wealth, however, proved too great for your husband's relative, and he fell ill of brain-fever and died. Strange, isn't it, that the gold killed him?'

'How very foolish!' murmured the young widow.

'A rolling stone, you see, is hampered by moss! He died in Cobbin's arms, making him promise to bring his will to England and to see the girl to whom he has left all his money and his claim. That girl, I am glad to tell you, is your daughter, Miss Sara Beddoes.'

'Why did he choose her?' asked the

widow. There was no sound of pleasure in her voice.

‘Why? My dear madam, you must see Mr. Cobbin yourself. A most interesting man. A little rough, perhaps, but a true friend to your daughter. He will explain everything to you.’

‘Frank Ferrars only saw Sara once, ten years ago.’

‘So it seems, but he took a fancy to her. She was, I believe, a pretty little girl. Is she a pretty woman? though I need hardly ask that question when I am speaking to her mother.’

‘And I am hardly the person to answer that question,’ said Mrs. Beddoes. ‘People consider her nice-looking. She is certainly not a beauty.’

‘Admirable mother!’ said the lawyer to himself. Aloud he added, ‘I am sorry Miss Beddoes is not at home.’

‘ She is coming home this evening [for a night before returning to her school. She is working for a scholarship. I told you she was destined to teach.’

Mr. Profitt smiled, and waved his fat hand deprecatingly at the bare notion of teaching.

‘ All that will be unnecessary. I must tell you that there is mention of a handsome allowance for her present maintenance, which will, of course, be paid over to you.’

‘ I am to spend it as I think best?’

‘ Yes, of course, certainly. There is only one trustee, this same Jethro Cobbin. Rather a strange trustee for a pretty girl, I must say, still he means to leave all the business details to me.’

The widow raised her eyes again to the stout man’s face.

‘ Thank you, you are very kind. Will

you tell Sara this evening, or shall I?’

‘Oh, you, of course, I leave it to you, my dear madam, but I will call early tomorrow before going back to town. I’ve engaged a room at the hotel. Pretty country this.’

‘Yes, beautiful country. Won’t you dine with us?’ but the lawyer excused himself, dreading what a poor lady’s idea of a good dinner might be.

When Mrs. Beddoes was once more left alone, she stood for some time by the fireplace motionless, except that occasionally she glanced at the looking-glass. She was naturally graceful, and when she stood or moved, those whose tastes inclined towards art, involuntarily thought ‘what a perfect model she would make.’

‘Why did he pass me over?’ she said at last, in a low tone. ‘It is ridiculous that Sara should come in for all that

money—Sara—and I am to be—— But there is a year still before me, a year! One can do a good deal in a year. How strange, how strange!’ She sat down suddenly and clasped her hands. ‘I am free from poverty now, free! But Sara—who understands nothing, who . . . who——’ She rose quickly again, a blush spread over her face, a blush, the reason of which was hidden in the depth of her soul. ‘Sara is not like her father, she is not suspicious. She will have plenty of suitors now, and most likely she will throw herself away. I am too young to take the second place. I have kept her away so long from me, and now she must live here. It is unjust, unfair, to have passed me over. With that money I could have lived my life again.’ She stopped short, her eyelids drooped, and an expression of barely suppressed indignation made her

suddenly look ten years older. Once more she went towards the looking-glass and gazed at her face. Certainly she was very pretty, a beauty which invariably attracted men, it was so feminine, so gentle. Then suddenly the soft colour rushed back again to her face, and she knelt down upon the hearth-rug. 'I hate her,' she said, 'I hate her, and I am her mother.'

CHAPTER II.

A SURPRISE.

CHAPEL STACEY lies embosomed in the midst of fascinating scenery, and the hills round about it effectually guard the village from the wild, north winds. On one side of the valley runs the chain of the Highmynds, and on the other, two high hills rise near each other, only separated by an upland road which winds for miles round lonely and lovely coombs. On the summit of the Highmynds you can walk for many miles along a narrow table-land, from

which you can gaze at many and varied visions of English and Welsh hills and far distant plains. When weary of this, you can turn aside, and on the left you may descend one of the many winding coombs, all more or less steep, and all beautiful, yet each one possessing its own distinctive beauty. By this means the traveller will reach some lonely village nestling at the entrance of these quaint valleys, or he can follow one of the little streams as it circles round the foot of the miniature spurs, till at last, like its fellows, it guides him to the main valley.

At Chapel Stacey, the Manor-House and its farm-buildings form an oasis in the midst of Lord Stretton's large property. This nobleman owns miles and miles of the beautiful country, and nearly half the houses in Chapel Stacey belong to him. That the Manor-House was the freehold

property of Mr. Gwillian, and could not be acquired from him, was a real sorrow to the late Lord Stretton, though the Manor is a mere toy estate compared with the rest of the great man's possessions.

The house was quaint and old-fashioned. Black timbers crossed the *façade*, and many of them were richly carved. The rooms were beautifully proportioned and picturesque. The garden was a paradise of natural beauty, and not far off was a small hill, at the top of which the remains of an ancient castle were still discernible. What a happy playground for the children of the Manor this had always been, and what games Virginia and Herringham Gwillian had enjoyed in the still perfect moat, especially when their cousin Sara was with them. Sara was always the life of the party; at least, Herringham thought so. But childhood had already passed away,

and of late years the old castle had been forsaken by the young people for longer expeditions over the breezy Highmynds. Mr. Gwillian was poor, and farming did not make him richer, but he was not given to complaining, and his wife—‘Aunt Lil,’ as Sara called her—was the most hopeful of living creatures. She was short and stout, and saw the best side of everyone; indeed, she seldom saw any other.

‘Sara! Sara!’ she now called out, standing at the foot of the exquisitely-carved oak stairs. ‘Come down, dearie, to your lunch. Herringham says that you have only half-an-hour before he takes you to the station.’

It was Virginia who came in answer to her mother’s appeal. She was quiet, shy, and somewhat sad-looking like her father, but still possessing an innate sense of humour which made her good company

among her own people. She looked upon Sara Beddoes as her sister, and she had often petitioned her cousin to come and live altogether at the Manor, but Sara always answered that her mother would want her when her education was finished. She adored her mother, and never questioned that all she did was entirely right.

‘Sara is taking leave of Caradoc,’ said Virginia, smiling through her tears.

‘Poor Caradoc! I believe he mopes when Sara goes away.’

‘We all do,’ said Virginia.

Herringham entered at this moment. He was tall, dark, with a low, white brow. He had no hair on his face, out of which looked forth very sad eyes; but, to counteract this, he had a smile that gave the lie to sadness.

‘Who mopes when Sara goes?’ he asked.

‘Caradoc. They are taking leave of each other.’

Then there was heard the rustle of a woman’s dress, next the shuffle of four determined terrier toes, lastly the door burst open, and the two entered together. At first sight, Sara quite bewildered a stranger. Was she pretty or not pretty? was her hair of a lovely colour, or too visibly auburn? Were her eyes too pleading and pathetic for the laughing dimples on the bright cheeks, or was she altogether merry-looking? These questions could not be answered all at once.

She was rather tall, her figure was perfect, and there was health and strength visible in every movement. Sometimes her face was just a nice-looking face, beautified above its intrinsic merit by that coil of gold-red hair; but sometimes there was

a world of tenderness in her eyes which belied the youthful carelessness of the rest of her features. At times her heart seemed to flash into her eyes, and you felt that this girl had depths not yet fully revealed to herself or to others.

‘Here we are, Aunt Lil. I think every time it becomes worse.’

‘What does, my dear?’

‘Parting from Caradoc.’

Sara laughed, but the look of the inner feeling flashed for one moment into her grey eyes, and told the listener that it was not only Caradoc of which she spoke.

‘What is the use of grinding away at examination work?’ said Herringham. ‘You are leaving the country just when it’s most lovely. Women were not made to work their brains.’

‘I’ll come again in the summer. You see, one must grind to get a scholarship.’

Mother says she can't afford a penny more for my education.'

'Hang education!' said the young man. 'You are quite educated enough.'

'If one goes in for the teaching profession, it's better to be thorough; besides, in these days it is a necessity.'

'You won't like it,' put in Virginia.

'Oh, I must. Mother won't hear of anything else. I did suggest being a milliner or a cook.' Sara was grave for half a moment, then her bright smile returned. 'Bear me witness, I'll be a merciful teacher.'

'You had much better marry,' said Virginia, cutting the cake with a little savage gesture.

Sara blushed suddenly, but no one saw her discomfiture.

'Mother says penniless brides are myths of the middle ages.'

‘What rot!’ said Herringham, under his breath.

‘I’ve got a beautiful idea. I shall get a first class in modern languages, then shall try for a highly-paid post in a High School, and then I shall make a home for mother, where she can sit still and look pretty. Do you know, Aunt Lil, that every year she gets prettier?’

‘Here is your uncle, dear,’ said Aunt Lil, seeing her son’s face darkening.

Herringham would never believe in his aunt’s perfection. Mr. Gwillian was a very absent man, and even now it seemed a surprise to him to see Sara standing ready dressed for departure.

‘Ah! good-bye, dear. Herringham will see you to the station. How unlike your mother you are growing. Tell her so from me, and ask her if she ever means to come here.’

‘I wish she would live here. That would be perfect. Willington is neither town nor country, but the vicar and the curates and everybody love her so much they won’t let her go.’

‘So you go back to school to-morrow?’

‘Yes. Oh, Uncle Tom, what should I do without the dear Manor-House?’

Herringham’s eyes beamed with delight, but Sara had her back to him, and saw nothing of it.

‘What should we do without you, Sara?’

The tall man stooped down, kissed her, and then departed. He looked a little troubled as he passed by his son.

‘It’s almost a pity she ever came here,’ he muttered to himself. ‘We miss her too much when she goes.’

Then came the final kiss for Virginia

and Aunt Lil, not excluding Caradoc, and then Herringham and Sara walked side by side to the station, which was distant only ten minutes from the Manor, but these ten minutes were sacred to Herringham, if quite ignored by Sara.

‘I sometimes think I am too lively for mother. But I do love my life, even grinding at examinations has some charm. If I can save her a little anxiety it will all be easy. I shan’t mind how hard I work.’

‘You never think of yourself.’

‘Oh! don’t I?’

‘No, always of—your mother.’

Sara laughed.

‘Is that wrong?’

‘Oh, no—of course not—but you forget us.’

‘Forget you! Never! Chapel Stacey is just—just heaven. This isn’t humbug.

I can't humbug people. In my future profession——'

'Which?'

'Teaching, of course, you stupid boy. Well, even in that I see people humbugging others.'

'It's the way to get on.'

'No, you don't believe that!' Suddenly Sara raised her eyes and exclaimed, 'Is that Mr. Osborne, Herringham?'

'Yes,' said Herringham, curtly.

'He's coming to speak to us. He's going back to Oxford, I suppose.'

'I dare say.'

Percival Osborne was Lord Stretton's only son, and he was the best type of a frank, honest young Englishman.

'How do you do, Miss Beddoes?' he said, cordially, and looking at Sara's face he thought her even prettier than he had thought her before.

They had met for the first time at a County Hospital ball, and one evening had done the mischief, at least on his side, he thought.

‘Are you going back to Oxford?’ said Sara, very simply.

‘Yes.—Are you going this way?’

‘No, I’m going to Willington to-day and then to London.’

‘Oh! It seems a shame to leave the country, doesn’t it? I hope we shall meet in the autumn. There’s a reading-party coming to Chapel Stacey. I’ve bespoken Lane’s house for it.’

‘I shall be going to Girton, I hope. To teach now-a-days one must have done all sorts of things.’

‘To teach?’

Percival looked again at Sara, and the idea of her doing anything but receive admiration seemed preposterous.

‘Yes, I hope you see before you a future head-mistress.’

‘Head-mistress of a house, Miss Beddoes?’

‘A house; no, of a High School!’ and Sara laughed heartily.

‘Oh! Yes, of course.’

‘Sarah, your train is coming,’ said Herringham, and he walked off.

‘Good-bye, I’m so glad we met.’

Herringham’s brow was very clouded.

‘What did that young fool mean by talking to you, Sara?’

‘He wished to——well, to be pleasant, I suppose.’

‘Here is an empty carriage.’

‘Third-class, please, Herringham.’

‘You ought not to travel third-class.’

‘What a man’s idea! On the contrary, it is much safer.’

‘Good-bye.’

They kissed. They had always done it,

but now Herringham felt that the day was consecrated. For many years he had done it without thinking.

‘Sara.’

‘Yes?’

‘Don’t make plans about your mother. She might not fall in with them.’

‘You don’t know her.’

‘You’ll come again as soon as ever you can?’

‘Of course. Shall I bring a reading-party?’ and Sara laughed.

‘Hang the reading-parties.’

‘We have an Indian princess, you know. She would turn your head.’

‘Would she!’ Herringham spoke scornfully. Suddenly Sara was grave, her soul was visible through her eyes.

‘We’re off, Herringham. Thank you for all your goodness. You are a real . . . real——’

The train was moving.

‘What?’ he said quickly, and much too earnestly.

‘A real brother.’

He walked home very slowly, for his mind was filled with moody thoughts. Sara seemed so much alive, so full of energy, so eager to join in life’s battle, and once there he knew that she would drift away from her old home, whilst he was tied to this country life. His father could not spare him, and he would become more and more the country farmer, the man who could not leave home often, and who must wait on nature’s moods. Herringham knew that it would be better for all of them if the old home were sold. They could only just keep their heads above water, but not for one moment would his father agree to this. If the Manor-House were put up to auction, Lord Stretton would buy it, and if

his father had one strong passion it was a determination that his land should never be possessed by his rich neighbour, whose father had long ago made an offer for it. No, Herringham was tied to the land quite as much as were the ancient serfs, and he would never be able to follow Sara. Did she even know he loved her? He had never breathed a word of it, and she always treated him as a brother.

That same evening the drawing-room of the little villa at Willington was lighted up with a shaded lamp. A fire burnt brightly in the grate when the door was flung open, and in a moment Sara had her arms round her mother's neck.

‘Mother! It is delightful! How are you? You don't look well. I've got heaps of messages for you. Uncle Tom wonders why you never come to your old home. Aunt Lil and Virginia send their love, and

dear old Herringham is getting quite a farmer, and talks learnedly about the rotation of crops.'

Sara's eyes were full of softness now, and her tall figure and bright hair made light to the room. Her voice was so true and sounded so musical that a stranger must have thought that any mother would have been made glad by hearing it. Mrs. Beddoes disengaged herself very gently, however, so that Sara hardly felt the effort.

'Tea is coming in, Sara. Are you cold?'

Sara had never known her mother effusive. She therefore expected no great outward sign of affection though she herself gave so much. In her own mind she put down her mother's extraordinary calmness to heroically suppressed grief. Sorrow had crushed her mother's spirit, and

Sara nursed the belief that when all anxiety was over she would be bright and demonstrative. At least, she hardly expressed this in words, but such was her undefined feeling about it.

‘So you have enjoyed your holidays?’

‘Immensely. I always do at the Manor. If you were there it would be perfect.’

‘I dislike visiting old scenes.’

‘I know, and of course it would be painful to you, mother dear. You were happy there as a girl, weren’t you?’

‘All girls are happy till they know real life.’

‘Well, I hope I shan’t know it for a long time.’

‘Did you work?’

‘Yes, indeed. Every morning I read for three hours, and in the evening I tried to read, but Herringham is crazy about music. I had to sing a great deal.’

There was a pause, the widow looked thoughtfully into the fire and tried to frame her next sentence according to her liking, but she could not do so.

Sara got up and looked round the room.

‘ You have changed nothing, mother. There is your dear picture taken when you were just the age that I am now. How very, very pretty it is! I shall never be taken for your daughter, though on the whole I think you are even prettier now.’

Mrs. Beddoes did not answer. Sara looked round to see the reason. Her hands were clasped, and she seemed not to have heard her last remark. Sara moved a few steps nearer.

‘ Mother, what is the matter?’

‘ Are you very anxious to go to college, Sara?’

‘ Anxious! Of course I am, as it is

quite necessary for my future plans. I shall get a good post, and then you can live with me and never bother about money. It will be so charming, and when we get our holidays we shall go to the Manor together. That will be delightful! All these years you have been working for me, and deprived yourself of many nice things for my sake, and now I am longing to work for you.'

'Ah!' Mrs. Beddoes gave a little sigh.

'Do you remember how idle I was at school; you wrote and told me that unless I worked hard, I should never be able to keep myself. That cured me of idleness. I realized then that we were poor and that you were suffering for me. Mother, children are selfish wretches.'

'Something has happened, Sara, which will end that long struggle.'

‘What is it?’

Sara knelt by the fire-place, and the bright fire-light fell on her hair, imparting a golden hue to the auburn. Child-love filled her eyes, and the colour flushed all over her bright face.

‘You are past twenty, Sara. It is time you knew a little of our history, but you are still very young for your age.’

‘Yes, I suppose I am. Life is so delightful and——’

‘I was very young when I married your father. I believed he was well off, but I was mistaken.’

‘Poor, dear, little mother.’

Sara put an arm round her mother’s waist.

‘When he died he left me his debts, and I have been struggling to pay them.’

‘How good of you! But one would do anything for those we have loved.’

Mrs. Beddoes lifted her eyes for one moment to the bright, loving face beside her. Then gently and in the same tone of voice she said,

‘I had never loved him.’

‘Oh, mother!’ Sara’s face was almost changed. She had never thought such a thing possible.

‘Yes, I was made to accept a man I did not love because I loved a man I was not allowed to marry.’

‘Was grandpapa so cruel?’

‘He was a tyrant, we were both afraid of him, but he was influenced by others, and I—I never forgave him.’

‘But the man—the man you loved, why didn’t he——’

‘He was young, and he was ruled by his mother. He could not be firm. It

was only when I heard of his engagement that I gave in.'

'How dreadful! Mother, I shall make up to you for all your pain.'

Mrs. Beddoes, without moving her head, looked sideways at the girl. Then she smiled, and Sara never guessed what that smile meant.

'Have you seen him since?' added Sara, hardly knowing what to say, and full of strange new thoughts.

'Never.' Then, as if to herself, she added, 'We were poor. My father could give me no money, and my lover's mother settled that he was to marry an heiress.'

'He wasn't worthy of you!' said Sara, laying her cheek against her mother's breast.

'No, but I loved him, and—and—I hated everyone else.'

There was silence in the room, a tragedy seemed to fold its shadow round Sara's pure mind. Two tears fell slowly down her cheeks.

'Is she—is that other woman alive?'

'Yes.'

'And has he been happy? I am sure he has not.'

'No, he has not been happy. He could not be.' She said the last words in a low, hard voice.

'Oh, mother!'

'That was not what I wished to tell you, Sara. Something has happened which will change your life. Mine was ended years ago.'

'No, no. You are so young, you look hardly older than I do, mother, and you have me. Oh, we have each other; you will be happy yet.'

'Happy!'

‘ Yes, we shall live together, and I will work for you, and I shall never marry unless—unless my husband loves you as much as I do. He shall be your son—but I would rather not marry, I will have you all to myself, and you will forget the past.’

‘ Forget!’ Mrs. Beddoes smiled scornfully, but the dimness hid her smiles, as she added, ‘ Yes, we must live together, Sara, in future, but you need not work for me. Something has happened which takes away that necessity.’

‘ What is it?’

‘ Your father’s cousin has left you his money.’

‘ Cousin Frank Ferrars! I remember him when I was a little girl, and he was always poor and always making, or going to make, wonderful discoveries which you laughed at.’

‘He made one at last. By chance he discovered a gold-field, and he has left you his claim.’

‘To me! . But is it much? Gold-fields don’t seem to make people rich.’

‘I don’t know; but Mr. Profitt, the lawyer, says you will be rich, very rich, when you come of age.’

‘Oh, mother!’ said Sara, ‘and I was so happy in making day-dreams for you, and now they are useless.’

She hid her face on her mother’s shoulder, and a little sob was heard.

CHAPTER III.

SARA'S GUARDIAN.

JETHRO COBBIN could not be called a gentleman in the usual sense of the word. Though at this moment his clothes were of the very best make and of the best material, they refused to fit him, and, though he had bought some expensive gloves, they too refused to fit, so he could only manage to hold them very tightly in one hand all the time he spoke to Sara. In a fit of shyness he had hidden his hat behind his chair, but he felt very consci-

ous of its presence till Sara's sudden smile made him forget everything except the fact that he was the legal guardian of this charming girl.

Sara's beauty was by no means of a perfect type; no feature was perfect in itself, but the shape of the head and the way it was set on her rounded neck helped to deceive strangers. What was really beautiful in her was her expression, and the glow of life and kindness she seemed to diffuse around her. A casual observer felt at once that here was a girl who knew nothing bad of life, whose pure nature might be trusted to turn all that was dross into gold, and that, for some mysterious reason, evil could not approach her.

Jethro Cobbin, himself one of nature's gentlemen, was at once fascinated by this mysterious influence, and by the sunshine of the girl's unsullied nature.

‘Tell me about my cousin,’ she said, sitting down near this new guardian. Her mother had gone out on some ‘errand of mercy,’ as the vicar called even Mrs. Beddoes’s simplest walks.

‘He was a man in a thousand, Miss Beddoes, he was indeed; but, unfortunately, just one that seemed cursed with ill-luck. Whatever he took up was sure to fail. His friends found it out, then the men he employed fought shy of him, till at last there was hardly anyone that would chum with him. “He’s bad luck in person,” they would say, and so he was. I was one of some half-dozen men he once picked out to go and work a claim he had prospected. He was that eloquent and that clever at words that he took us all in. Well, as usual, it all came to nothing. The claim was worthless, and he just cleared himself out. The men grumbled

mightily and deserted, but I couldn't leave him. We had somehow become chums, and I saw that he was ill, and so I just threw ideas of luck to the winds, and I stuck to him. He couldn't put up with things as well as I could. You see, he was born and bred a gentleman, and I wasn't.'

'Oh, but you are something better,' said Sara, holding out her hand. 'You didn't forsake him.'

Jethro blushed like a girl to hear this beautiful creature praising him; her voice too reminded him of poor Ferrars's hopeful speeches.

'Well, anyhow I stuck on, but we were very hard put to it, I can tell you. Western Australia isn't like some of the old colonies, but he was always so hopeful. I hadn't an ounce of faith in him, that's true, but I saw that he wasn't strong

enough to rough it alone, so we joggled on together.'

'I hope you'll stick on to me,' said Sara, suddenly laughing. 'I feel so lost, now I have to think about money.'

'I should rather think I would,' said Jethro, colouring again, 'though of course now you'll be a very grand lady, Miss Beddoes.'

'Oh no, no! I can't be that. I've always been poor—though I have been very happy. But tell me about Cousin Frank after the great discovery.'

'He kept it to himself for a few days, and we went to Perth, and then he said, "Jethro, I must borrow enough to buy up another claim." "No," I said. "You'll do no such thing. You're deep in debt as it is." "I'll succeed yet, Jethro, I promise you this time." Well, I gave in, and I went and sold all that I could

lay hands on, and gave my name for what it was worth, because I saw he was ill and that he was bent on this thing. I thought, of course, it was only just his last piece of ill-luck, but I didn't like to go against him. Somehow we got the money together and bought the land. No one believed in gold there, and we got it cheap. When we had pegged out the claim and got up a few men, then one night he told me. "Jethro," he said, "luck's turned at last, and look here, my friend,"—he said this just like that—"you're the only one [that has ever stuck by me, and you shall have a third for your very own. Your very own, mind, Jethro, and I'll pay all you've lent me back. If I've been unlucky, I'm honest, I'll pay back everything." Well, he brought the deeds and got a lawyer and made it all fast before the truth burst

upon me. The poor fellow's luck had turned! He had hit upon a rich field. How he lived during the next two years I don't know. It was the excitement that kept body and soul together, and perhaps a bit of my care into the bargain. He paid all his debts and gave large interest too, and then he began putting by. But I saw, all the time, he couldn't live long, so I said one day, "Look here, Ferrars, if I was you I'd make my will, or by-and-by there'll be a precious piece of business over this property. You'll have a crowd of relations claiming this little hoard, and the lawyers 'll swallow it up;"—for you know, Miss Sara, that lawyers have digestions like ostriches. "Well," said he, "so I will, though I mean to live some time longer and enjoy my luck. I'll leave it all to a little girl with red hair, just like beech leaves in

autumn." So he did, and we often talked together of the little girl with hair like beech leaves. Well, the end came at last. He just fell down one day and died in an hour, and the doctor said his life for a year past had been a miracle. He had made me guardian, you know, and that's why I'm here. He told me once I was to go to Mr. Profitt and he'd pull me through; and here I am, and I'm sure it's an honour, Miss Sara, for me, for I'm only a rough sort of man, and I owe all my fortune to your cousin, and if there's anything I can do for you, I will.'

Jethro had been through with his speech, and now felt more at his ease. Sara laughed. She had cried about being rich, but now there had come a sudden revulsion, and she was making new day-dreams about all the people she would help, and how she would act in a year's

time when she should be free to do as she liked.

‘ You are going to let my mother spend the money this year for me and for her. You don't know how happy I am to think she won't have to deprive herself any more for me,’ said Sara.

‘ Yes, she'll spend it for you this year, but after that I'm your guardian. You'll come to me if you want anything, won't you, Miss Sara ?’

‘ Of course.’

‘ I'm a plain man, and I've got more than enough money myself. Indeed, I've come to hunt up some of my own people, if so be I can find them. They've forgotten me long ago. They'll be surprised, but I'm going to look round and see first. Here's just a little pocket-money to begin with, Miss Sara, advanced from your own money.’ He held out a very

new, large yellow purse, which that very morning he had chosen at Willington. 'It's a hundred pounds, just a little to teach you how to spend it, and there's more where that comes from.'

'A hundred pounds! I never had so much in my life,' cried Sara, and Jethro Cobbin laughed.

'That's nothing. You know luck did turn with a vengeance. There's some goodish thousands for you when you're of age.'

Jethro Cobbin was not a gentleman, and his hands were rough, but Sara felt she had in him a friend worth more than all the money she was to have.

'Oh, Mr. Cobbin, I don't wonder Cousin Frank trusted you.'

'Just call me plain Jethro, will you now, Miss Sara? I can't fit myself on to a Mr. Cobbin.'

‘ I’ll call you guardian,’ said Sara, who really could not bring herself to call him by his Christian name. ‘ That’s a delightful name. One feels safe with it, you see. There is mother coming in. She can’t realize it yet, I am sure, but I wish Cousin Frank had left her the money instead of leaving it to me.’

Jethro Cobbin looked very much frightened at the idea of seeing Mrs. Beddoes again. She had not made him feel at his ease, and, besides, he remembered remarks Ferrars had let fall about her; so he hastily took his leave, for he was going to dine with Mr. Profitt before taking the evening train back to town.

‘ I have seen Mr. Profitt, Sara,’ said Mrs. Beddoes, slowly, ‘ and he has settled everything. We are to live in London this year, and you are at once to be introduced into London society. It seems that that

strange man thinks London the only place fit for an heiress.'

'But you, mother,—what do you think of it?'

'I shall be glad to leave Willington,' she said, carelessly.

'Shall you? Then that is all right. How strange it is that now I feel almost sorry to be leaving my school life, and yet I had really rather dreaded it, though I made Mr. Osborne believe that I was going to enjoy it immensely.'

'Mr. Osborne! Of whom are you talking?' Mrs. Beddoes lifted her eyelids.

'Lord Stretton's son, you know, mother. Herringham does not like him, because he is prejudiced.'

'Does he come to the Manor now?'

'Now? He never did. Uncle Tom does not like Lord Stretton, I don't know why.'

‘Tom never did.’

‘Did you know him then when you were young? The family never come to Chapel Stacey church. Virginia says it’s hard on the poor folk, because they used to curtsey to his seat when they came in, and then they went on doing it when it was empty.’

‘Virginia has grown sarcastic, has she?’

‘Well, no, not exactly. She is rather clever, but she looks so gentle that people don’t find it out. Mother, my guardian is delightful. He is so—so straight-forward. Cousin Frank knew it, I expect. I couldn’t trust him with anything, and look what he has given me.’

Sara spread out the two notes of fifty pounds each. The widow’s colour rose a little as she touched them.

‘I thought all the money was to come

through Mr. Profitt. I am to have a very generous allowance this year.'

'Guardian said this was advanced from my money. I am glad; I want to buy something beautiful for you, dear mother, and something for the dear folks at the Manor.'

Sara disappeared to fetch her writing things, and Mrs. Beddoes sat down with the two notes on her lap. Now and then she touched them; then she blushed as she put them on the table and said to herself,

'It has all come too late. I wonder what Percival Osborne is like? Strange he should have noticed Sara. If only that queer man does not choose a house in some ridiculous part of London, I can do something in a year. Grateful! I am not grateful. It was pure spite of Frank Ferrars to pass me over. Why should *his* child have everything—everything?'

‘Look here, mother,’ exclaimed Sara, returning, ‘I think I am foolish to give up all my prospects of a college education. Suppose all this fairy gold disappears?’

‘It is quite safe at present, and Mr. Cobbin has promised to see to the future.’

‘Isn't it fun to have a guardian like that! He is quite an original character, and he will take a great interest in our London life.’

‘He had much better return to Western Australia. We do not want him. I shall renew my friendship with old friends in town.’

‘It is very nice to be rich, only it is at present almost too much of a surprise.’

‘When I was your age I meant to be rich, and I have been poor all my life.’

Sara knelt by her mother and put her arms round her waist.

‘And you have not been happy! Poor little mother! Do you know my mission this year will be to make you understand happiness, and you must help me and teach me how to do it.’

Mrs. Beddoes looked up slowly at the girl beside her, at the handsome young creature who was so full of life and so full of happiness, but her heart seemed only to beat to a feeling of jealousy which she could not control. The child of that man was to have all that was good in life, whilst happiness had been denied to her. *His* child seemed born under a lucky star, full of love and brightness and all that brings what is most worth having in this world. *His* child was to become rich at one bound without the difficult question of marriage intervening, and she, her mother, ought to be rejoicing and helping forward this joy. In

spite of this she could feel nothing but a dull, stupid jealousy, a secret indignation that fate had been hard on her and had showered benefits on his child——his child, the child of the man she had hated.

CHAPTER IV.

A LAST GIFT.

'Come at once. Mother is ill.—Clarissa.'

That was Percival Osborne's greeting one morning about a week after he reached Oxford. He was reading one of Horace's odes and scribbling down the last verse in English when the telegram was brought to him.

'In troublous days show thyself brave ;
And wisely thou wilt never fail,
When blows the wind too prosperously,
To furl the sail.'

'Very rough and common in English,'

he was saying to himself, and then he tore open the envelope. 'Hulloa! I think the sails look after themselves generally. I am afraid Clara means something serious, or she would not send for me.'

A few hours later the young man stood on the doorstep of Stacey Hall, an old Elizabethan house situated ten miles from Chapel Stacey, and surrounded by a large and very picturesque park and a beautiful garden. It was a well-known fact that the mansion had been restored by Lady Stretton's money. She was an heiress, and after her marriage her money had been very freely spent on the old place. If this were well known, there was yet another open secret about her,—that she was a woman of ungovernable temper. The county openly discussed the family quarrels in the household of Stacey Hall.

Lord Stretton was a man in the prime of life, no one could see him without being struck by his appearance, but there was a look of acute suffering on his well-curved mouth, and he had a slight frown which was always noticeable. Everyone knew that the household was divided against itself. The husband and wife for years had barely condescended to speak to each other, and yet no real scandal had ever been able to delight the gossips which already surrounded the unhappy place. It was known that Clarissa Osborne took her mother's side, and that Percival avoided home as much as possible. Still, a better state of affairs always reigned when he was at Stacey, for he was beloved by both parents, and because of this was often the subject of their contentions. Lord Stretton's affections, never given to his wife, flowed abundantly towards his son.

Clara would have come in for her share had she allowed it, but her temper much resembled, though in a lesser degree, that of her mother, and she was always a violent partisan. She was fond of her mother, but chose to look upon her father as a household tyrant. If this was not the truth, there was yet some excuse for the girl's intense feeling. Never had she seen a sign of affection or a sign of feeling exhibited by her father towards her mother.

Lady Stretton suffered considerably at times from weakness of the heart's action, but she never complained, alleging that she would get no sympathy from her husband, and Clara, of course, believed what she said. She was ignorant of the scenes that in early years Lord Stretton had gone through, nor did the girl realise how absolutely a violent-tempered woman

can kill love, even where love exists. In this case, unfortunately, Lady Stretton knew well enough that her husband had never loved her, but she would not recall that she had knowingly accepted her position, and therefore that she had little reason to rebel against it. On the other hand, she loved her children devotedly, though this did not prevent her from making them suffer from her hasty temper. Percival had found it far happier for himself to spend much of his spare time away from home. He went abroad with tutors or schoolfellows, and later on he read hard during vacation time. He was now on the eve of taking his degree, so that his time was precious.

His father met him on the top of the flight of steps leading up to the hall door.

‘My dear boy! How quickly you have come. Clara telegraphed, I know.’

‘How is my mother?’ said Percival, quickly.

‘Your mother is a little quieter—I have not seen her. She did not wish it, but she is expecting you.’

Lord Stretton spoke as a man does when talking of some one unconnected with himself, and Percival felt pained.

Lady Stretton was decidedly better. In the morning she had had a severe heart attack, and the doctors had been very uneasy. She was, they said, to see no one but her son, which meant that her ladyship had refused to see her husband.

Percival knelt down by his mother’s side. She was propped up with pillows, and looked deadly pale. Her face spoke

so plainly of bad temper, that it was always with a certain undefined fear that her son approached her, for he was never certain at what moment the volcano of her wrath might become active.

‘Mother, I’m so glad you are better.’

‘I’m easier. Clara telegraphed.’ She spoke slowly but distinctly.

Clara entered from the next room. The brother and sister kissed each other, and she said to herself,

‘He has never realised that mother’s life has been one long martyrdom.’

‘I was so afraid you wouldn’t come,’ she whispered.

‘Not come! Of course I came.’

‘You are very busy just now, Percival, I know. I am sorry to have to bring you home,’ said his mother, raising her suffering eyes towards his face.

‘Don’t say that. Of course if you

want me I should have come at any time.'

'There is no "of course" in life, as you will find. Clara, leave us alone a little while.'

Clara frowned, but left the room thinking,

'Mother will make herself ill again talking to Percival.'

'Are we alone?' said Lady Stretton impatiently, as the door closed.

Percival rose, tried the doors, and came back to his mother's side.

'Yes, mother.'

'There's no hope for me, my boy, I know it. The next attack must be fatal, Percival.'

The young man became pale, for his mother's voice was hard, almost fierce.

'Indeed you must not think so, mother. You must get more advice. A London man——'

Lady Stretton laughed softly but scornfully.

‘I have had the best advice, of course, and Seymour is clever, but it is hopeless. Don’t let us talk of that. Whilst I am still able, I want to say something to you. You have been a good son to me, Percival, that is, as far as you could.’

Many short-comings flashed into his mind. Often he had preferred absence when he might have remained at home to ‘make things better,’ as he expressed it to himself, but the strange, silent battle between husband and wife had always made Percival disinclined to do anything but get out of sight of it. To pretend ignorance of it was better than to blame either parent, but this was the first time his mother had alluded to the subject.

‘I might have been more of a comfort to you.’

‘Yes ; young people are thoughtless,’ she said, slowly and bitterly, ‘but Clara has done all she could.’

Here again Percival was silenced. He had often thought to himself that Clara really provided incessant fuel to the angry flame.

‘But you can make some amends to me, Percival, when I am gone.’

‘Amends!’ Percival’s brow became cold. His youth seemed to be taking wings. ‘Mother! how can I? Don’t talk like that.’

‘You can guard my memory!’

‘There is no need.’

‘Percival, you know nothing about it. Your father loves you. Clara does not get on with him ; but you, you can do anything you like with him. Promise me what I am going to ask of you.’

‘Mother!—Tell me—how can I promise without knowing?’

A slight flush spread over her face, her brows contracted, and Percival was frightened at his own rashness. Suppose his words brought on another attack.

‘Mother, don’t misunderstand me.—Isn’t a mother’s memory always sacred? Hasn’t the thought of you kept me out of many scrapes. I remembered some little remark of yours about man’s selfishness, or his weakness, and your words have often kept me from temptation. You know I would do anything, anything for you.’

‘Very well, prove it.—When I am dead, Percival, take care of your father.’

Percival gave a slight start. The words seemed so strange coming from his mother’s lips. He knew, as all knew, the bitter feeling existing between husband and wife, though he thought that the cause

was only his mother's ungoverned temper. He himself had often been pained by it. It had shadowed—as much as was possible, considering his youth and his good spirits—his own life, and now she was asking him to take care of the man she was supposed to hate.

‘ You need not ask that, mother, I hope I shall always be a good son to—to [my father.]’

She took no notice of his words, but continued, looking as if she were far away beyond this life,

‘ Make some sacrifice for him.’

‘ I hope I shall not call my duty a sacrifice, especially if you have asked it of me.’

Lady Stretton closed her eyes a moment, and reopened them on Percival. She looked as only a dying woman can look at her only son. She noticed the smooth brow

over which dark brown, wavy hair fell, now a little in disorder; the honest, rather deep-set eyes alternately grave and gay and the straight nose and well-cut mouth, simple in its curves and in its expression. Percival was a son any mother would be proud of. Lady Stretton stretched out her white hand and laid it on his hair. The touch seemed to restore some of her energy.

‘Promise me that if—if I die you will throw up your work, and that you will immediately come and live with your father.’

Percival loved his college and he loved his work. He had spoken too soon when he scorned the word sacrifice.

‘I hope to take my degree as soon as——’

Lady Stretton’s face clouded over.

Percival saw the angry sparkle he knew so well when anything roused his mother's temper, especially when it was something his father had done to annoy her. Unconsciously he shrunk away a little, and then repented bitterly of this action. His mother was dying, and yet he was repulsing her.

‘Very well, Percival. I see that your fine words mean nothing.’

‘Mother!’

The word was spoken from the depth of his wounded heart.

She half waved him away, but he continued,

‘Don't look like that, mother; of course I meant that I——I would.’

Lady Stretton's expression calmed itself.

‘Thank you; promise it, Percival.’

‘ I promise you, mother, that I will come to my father and remain with him, unless, of course, he objects.’

She made another impatient exclamation.

‘ He will object, of course. But you must be true to *me*. You must not leave him upon any excuse. Promise—your refusal is making me worse.’

‘ Mother, mother, I promise faithfully. Pray, pray, don’t distress yourself.’

There was [a moment’s silence. The dying woman—she knew she was dying—appeared strangely satisfied, but still she frowned. She had more to say.

‘ Give me those drops, Percival.’ He obeyed, and poured them out as she directed.

She revived a little. Great strength of mind enabled her to keep up.

‘ I will tell you the reason. I can’t ex-

plain much—I can give you facts. Your father has never loved me, but when I married him I loved him passionately.’

Percival, knowing too well the life his parents lived, wondered how it was that his mother could say she had once loved. If he loved once, then he could never, never hate.

‘Isn’t there some mistake?’ he said, quickly, his youth seeming to fall away from him now that he was brought face to face with this dreadful sorrow. ‘Is it too late to make up? Father is not—hard really. He has always been a kind father. Oh, I believe that if—if you get better I might do something, I might heal some old sore that shouldn’t exist. Let me call him, even now.’

‘Hush, silly boy. You know nothing of life. A woman has ruined my life, another woman. He has loved her al-

ways, always. He loves her now. I thought that with my money and my love—I did love him with all my soul—I thought that I could conquer her. But I never did.—My temper got the upper hand, and then—then it was all up with me—I knew it, I knew that I had ruined my own chances with it, but I suffered so much—so much, Percival. I am young to die—I wanted so much to live, to keep *her* away—and now, now I can't. He will be glad of my death.'

'No, no, no,' burst from Percival.

'Hush!—I know it all. He will turn towards her and she will come to him. She has been waiting for this always, always. Percival, you have promised to—to keep her away.'

'Mother!'

The tragic, terrible earnestness of the dying woman frightened Percival. It was

as if a gulf opened before him and she bade him look down into it. All his young enthusiasm for what was upright and manly seemed to suffer from this vision, and he felt as if he must get up and rush away.

‘You have promised your dying mother to keep her away,’ she repeated, slowly.

‘But how? When? I am powerless—I don’t know her. I don’t believe in her power. What is her name?’

Lady Stretton’s white lips moved. She tried to pronounce a name, but stopped short. It seemed as if her throat could not make the necessary sound.

‘If she comes you will know her, and *she will come*,’ she stammered forth in her agitation.

All at once Percival felt glad not to know. He did not believe in this woman. If it were true, and he did not doubt it—it all

happened long ago. No one ever accused his father of any wrong action. Lady Stretton could never have sued for a divorce, for no scandal had ever been so much as hinted at as the cause of their miserable life.

‘Calm yourself, mother. I have promised. You will make yourself worse; let me call Clara.’

‘Yes, call Clara. Stop, say it again, Percival. You will prevent that woman from being mistress here?’

‘All in my power; I can say no more than that.’

‘If she came here I could not——’

Clara hurried in.

‘Percival, she mustn’t talk like this. Don’t excite yourself, dear mother. Has he done what you wanted?’

‘Yes; kiss me, Percival.’

The young man stooped down and

kissed the white forehead, but suddenly a feeling of revulsion took possession of him. The hatred which had glowed like a furnace fire in his mother's eyes seemed to send a deadly chill through him. It was as if her dying gift to him was a gift of hatred.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE END.

LADY STRETTON revived that evening. Her mind appeared easier, and the conversation with her son seemed to have taken a weight off her mind. Indeed, she declared that Clara must leave her with her maid to go down and dine with her brother.

In spite of state, servants, and wealth, the dinner in the great dining-room was always a chilly entertainment when the mistress of the house was able to take her place. All his married life Lord Stretton had been irritated by the feeling that he was in-

debted to the wife he had never loved for his luxurious well-being. This feeling, and others more to be respected, had kept him blameless, but it had added several deep furrows in his broad forehead. He was of middle height, well made, handsome, and still in the prime of life : but shy with strangers, though in appearance every inch an English gentleman, a man who might have done much more with his life if he had not taken one fatal step, that of a loveless marriage in youth. He had forsaken the woman he loved for the woman his mother bade him marry, and his sin had brought its own tenfold punishment. No need for the hand of God to fall heavier upon him, the hand of woman had not spared him.

Sometimes, however, when he looked at Percival his heart warmed with new life. Concerning his son, his pride could still

reassert itself, and he thought, 'My boy makes up for everything.' To-night, as he passed into the dining-room, he placed his hand on the young man's shoulder, and said, as they followed Clara,

'You have always been a good son to her, Percival. I hear you have calmed her mind.'

Percival felt an inward shiver as he recalled the scene he had just gone through.

'She will get better, she will——'

'You must stay a few days if it is possible, though I know you can ill spare the time.'

The three men-servants began their silent labours, so there could be no confidential talk. Clara's dark, bad-tempered face, though now and then relieved by a wonderful smile, did not conduce to light conversation.

‘Mother will sleep to-night,’ she said, shortly.

‘I’m sure she will,’ answered Percival, his hopeful nature reasserting itself.

‘I was looking at the county paper just now,’ said Clara, suddenly. ‘Percival, don’t you know the Gwillians of Chapel Stacey?’

‘Yes; at least I have met Herringham Gwillian often, and I know his father by sight.’

‘Well, a relation of theirs has just come in for some money. It is quite a romance—according to the papers, at least.’

‘What relation?’

‘A Miss Sara Beddoes.’

‘Beddoes?’ said Lord Stretton, helping himself to salt.

‘It makes quite a sensational article. Some one has left her a gold-mine.’

‘Some mines are scarcely profitable

concerns,' remarked Lord Stretton, carelessly.

'This one must be: the paper says she will be one of the richest heiresses in the country.'

'What nonsense! a mere tale,' answered Lord Stretton, as if he were annoyed.

'How strange!' said Percival. 'I saw her a short time ago, and she said nothing about it.'

'You saw her!' exclaimed both [father and daughter.

'Yes, at the station; but I [saw her first at the Walesbury ball.'

'Those balls are horrid things. You meet such strange people,' said Clara Osborne, in a cold, supercilious manner.

'I thought we were Liberals,' said Percival, smiling.

'Politics have nothing to do with people,' answered Clara, decidedly.

‘Only with *the* people,’ said Percival smiling.

‘Of course our politics are impersonal. We have always been Liberals. I don’t see why we should in consequence pretend to fraternize with Dick, Tom, and Harry.’

‘Pretend! No politics, I believe, announce that programme.’

‘All practise it,’ retorted Clara, sharply.

‘The Gwillians boast longer descent than we do, I fancy,’ said Percival. ‘They would not thank you for——’

The butler entered with a strange expression on his usually unmovable countenance.

‘Her ladyship would be glad to see you upstairs, ma’am.’

Clara started up. The tone, not the words, made her turn suddenly pale.

‘Percival!’ she said, and her brother followed her.

For a few moments Lord Stretton was left sitting alone at the table. He even ate a few more mouthfuls of the roast beef on his plate, then recollecting that something was happening upstairs which should concern him, he turned hastily towards Stevens, the butler.

‘What message did Lady Stretton send down, Stevens?’

‘Her ladyship’s maid told me to say——’
Before he could finish the sentence Percival rushed in.

‘Father, come at once; be quick. Mother is——’

Lord Stretton rose hastily, dropping his dinner napkin on the ground.

‘Is she worse?’ he said, in a low voice.

Percival did not answer, but he ran up the stairs without waiting for his father. At Lady Stretton’s door he paused till his father joined him.

‘Father, she is dying. Go in, go in and—and——’

Lord Stretton opened the door and walked in, but Clara stopped him.

‘Go back, go back! Oh! go away. Mother, mother, poor mother. She is dead! No one here but me cared for her, no one loved her; go away, go away!’

Lord Stretton quietly put the distracted girl on one side and went up to the bed. The doctor who had visited her an hour ago had been recalled but had not yet returned. The frightened maid stood near the bed trying to restore animation. What had happened was, one short spasm, one stifled call, and then oblivion. All was over even when Clara reached her mother’s bedside.

No one who had ever seen death could doubt it was here, and Lord Stretton bending over his unloved wife realized that the

long friction was over. It had been a miserable story of incompatible temper, borne because the scandal of a separation would have been unbearable to both of them.

‘Mother, mother!’ murmured Percival, kneeling down, but no tears came; instead, the remembrance of their last conversation seemed to be written in burning letters before his eyes.

He felt powerless, miserable, and as if an invisible hand had let down a black curtain to hide heaven from him.

Lord Stretton murmured a few words to the maid, inaudible because of Clara’s uncontrolled sobs, and Percival felt that in some strange way he was left alone with his dead mother. She had loved him though she had never been very demonstrative, and she had even been jealous of his father’s love for him; but he was her

son, he had bound himself to obey her, and, by all that Percival held sacred, he felt that nothing could release him from his promise—and yet; and yet it was hard that his career must be sacrificed, and that he must condemn himself to a life of partial inaction in order to—to——That seemed the most terrible part of the whole, he was to ruin his prospects in order to satisfy a deep, bitter feeling of human jealousy, even though the woman who had extracted the promise from him was now beyond the pale of human suffering.

The shaded lamp on the table, placed a little behind the bed, flared up, and small flakes began falling round about on the white curtains and on the spotless quilt. Percival rose to put it down. His hand trembled as he did so, and at that moment the doctor entered with the quick, noiseless step practised by the profession. One look

at Lady Stretton's face, and then he motioned them away.

Father and son went slowly into an adjoining room, and Lord Stretton sank down into a large arm-chair whilst Percival stood by him. The elder man shaded his face with his right hand and said nothing. He was sunk in thoughts of the past, and to Percival it seemed as if his father must know what his mother had said to him, and that he must now be pondering over it. This terrible legacy must come between them. It was as if his mother's spirit was hovering close beside him; he even put out his hand to ward her off, and then he despised himself for feeling thus when she, that is all that remained of her, was lying there dead and speechless. The tragedy of her married life was realised by him now far more than it had been during all his young life. Then he had put it

away with a strong, selfish hand, but now he blamed himself for having done so, feeling that he might have done more to heal the wound. He could not understand that youth has been given strong armour to prevent its immaturity from being crushed by the weight of an older generation of sorrow and sin.

In truth, Lord Stretton neither knew nor guessed anything of Percival's thoughts. His own were dark enough, except that somewhere in the depth of his being he breathed a deep sigh of relief, and then hated himself for doing so. The dead woman had been the mother of his children, she had been at the head of his household for all these years, but for all these years she had kept him in a state of martyrdom. The tyranny of their respective positions had furrowed his brow and had increased the power of her un-

governed temper. Now suddenly all this was over, and no one would ever be able to judge between them. Perhaps public sympathy would all centre round the woman who was dead. No one would understand that they had sinned equally in the beginning, and that in the end——

The door opened, and the doctor stood beside him.

Lord Stretton's first words were conventional.

'Is there no hope?'

'It is all over,' was the simple answer; and the doctor held out his hand to Percival, whose white face and frightened eyes showed that he stood in need of sympathy.

How could anyone offer it to Lord Stretton? Reserved and silent as he had been, the terrible estrangement of the husband and wife was the common talk, though

this talk was ignored most by the two principal characters themselves.

‘Come to your sister. She must restrain herself,’ he said, in a low voice. ‘Nothing more can be done.’

Percival went quickly to Clara’s side. She was kneeling on the floor, her head buried against a sofa, crumpling the stiff chintz in her agony of grief.

‘Clara, try to be calm—come away.’

Clara started up and followed her brother, more because she dared not speak in the presence of that silent form, than from any wish to be guided by Percival.

The two entered their mother’s morning-room, where there were still recent signs of her presence. The evening letters were lying placed ready for her on her own writing-table. No one had dared to bring them to her, and some

others lay there waiting to be answered.

‘Oh, Percival, Percival, she is dead. She suffered so much, and now she will never be able to—— Oh, she will soon be forgotten, and no one will care.’

‘Hush, Clara, she was my mother as well as yours.’

‘You—you always left her, you never comforted her. I was the only one who knew her. Her great noble nature was too good for all of you.’

‘Clara, you forget.’

‘Forget! How can I? What has my life been all this time? I have had no youth and no happiness because of—of that——’

‘Poor Clara!’ said Percival, suddenly realising how much truth lay in the girl’s passionate words.

‘But she cared for me. She told me never, never to marry.’

‘Hush! Don’t speak like this. You will be sorry for it afterwards.’

‘Sorry—oh, you will go away, and I shall have to see that father——’

‘I will not listen to this, Clara. Besides, you need not pity yourself so much. I shall not leave my father.’

From sheer astonishment Clara left off sobbing.

‘You won’t take your degree?’

‘No! I shall stay at home.’

‘No, no, you must not do that. I shall get on somehow, don’t think of me.’

Percival had certainly not thought of his sister, but he could not say so. He gently put his arm round her.

‘Poor Clara. We two must do the best we can between us for—father. No, I shall not leave home. I must help him with the land—oh, I shall find plenty

to do; besides, it is only honour that I shall lose, I have known the joys of Oxford.'

'Do you mean it?'

'Yes, most certainly. Clara, help me to make him happy.'

But Clara turned away.

'Did he ever try to make her happy? Oh, Percival, how am I to love him?'

CHAPTER VI.

FURNISHING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

JETHRO COBBIN had already gone twice over every room in the pretty hired London house, situated in Ludlow Square. He was trying to make sure that everything was perfect for the two ladies who were coming up this very afternoon. Considering that he knew nothing of London life, less of London society, Sara's guardian had done wonders. He had visited many agents, and at last, having found a house which he was assured would be suitable

for a lady of means, he had visited various wholesale establishments to see if they would undertake to furnish the house in a suitable style. Jethro Cobbin was cautious. He had learnt during his pilgrimage one great lesson, namely, to listen, and this talent enabled him to learn a great deal without betraying his own ignorance. By judicious management he often found that, instead of thinking him ignorant, dealers and shopkeepers looked upon him as possessed of a very superior wisdom, and after trying to make him buy inferior things, ended by showing him the 'real article.' On these occasions Cobbin went back to his small hotel, situated in a side street off the Strand, rubbing his hands with innocent delight.

'Miss Sara will be surprised,' he thought. 'She won't think I'm so stupid after all. It's her mother who looks down

on me. Oh! I can see that well enough, but Sara is just the most wonderful girl in all creation. When she says "Guardian," I feel as if she meant it, and by Jenkins! I'll not disappoint her. Poor Ferrars was right enough. Oh! he too was the genuine article; but the mother, good Lord! I can't swaller her!

There was only one thing Cobbin had allowed Mrs. Beddoes to have a hand in. She might, he had said, bring her own female servants, but he would choose the man-servant; for Mr Cobbin declared that he knew a man if he knew anything, and he was going to provide the male protector of his ward.

At this moment no one but himself knew how many respectable men-servants he had interviewed. His way was this. Sitting silent at a table he allowed the men to talk to him. After three minutes

they usually permitted their sins to creep out of the bag, whereupon Mr. Cobbin dismissed them. At last he found what he called a treasure-trove, George Lumb by name. The interview began as usual, but Lumb remained speechless, so that Mr. Cobbin and he stood for full two minutes opposite each other without saying anything. Mr. Cobbin then began to feel a little nervous, for the first time his plan had broken down.

‘Well,’ he said at last. ‘Well, Mr. Lumb, haven’t you anything to say?’

‘I was waiting to hear what you had to say, sir,’ said Lumb.

‘Oh, well, good Lord, you’re the first that has done that.’

Lumb said nothing.

‘I want you to be a true and faithful servant to the ladies. There’s to be no drinking, Lumb, no, on no consideration

whatever, and no love-making to maids ; and as to the other things, I suppose you know about waiting and other duties better than I do.'

Lumb unfolded a written character, and put it under Mr. Cobbin's eyes.

'By Jenkins! I tell you plain, I've no faith left in paper, Mr. Lumb! It says you're honest and sober and an invaluable servant. They all say that.'

'It doesn't say that, sir,' said Lumb, grimly. 'It says, "Try him," and it's signed "Mrs. Lumb," sir, you see; she's my wife! That's the character I show, though I've got others.'

Jethro Cobbin laughed and chuckled, and chuckled and laughed so long that he was quite ashamed of himself, for he felt that he had found his match. Indeed, the butler did not laugh, only a grim smile passed over his features, a smile of pity for

Mr. Cobbin's weak manœuvres. Lumb was chosen, though in justice to Mr. Cobbin it must be owned that he did look at his other references, made enquiries, and could hear nothing but what was good of him. He was merely out of place in consequence of the death of his last mistress.

At this moment Lumb was in his pantry, counting out the new plate which Cobbin had bought by dozens. When the gold-digger had satisfied his mind that all he saw before him was very good, that is as far as he knew, he called up Lumb to make his assurance doubly sure.

‘Lumb, what do you think of this drawing-room? It's a neat little thing in its way, isn't it? You see your mistress is a dainty piece of goods, and she won't like to complain, so I shan't know her ideas on the subject.’

Lumb looked round with the air of a judge.

‘Yes, sir, it’s all up to date, except the fender.’

‘What’s the matter with that?’ said Mr. Cobbin, a little crest-fallen, for it was the one thing he had chosen for himself.

‘It’s the wrong period, sir. It’s Louey Quatorze and the rest is Queen Anne.’

Cobbin was silent, thinking over what possible objection this could be; and Lumb, caught in a trap, ventured a step further and so lost some of the weight of his authority.

‘King Louey Quatorze don’t go well with Queen Anne, sir.’

‘Weren’t they married, Lumb?’ said Cobbin.

‘Not exactly, sir,’ said Lumb, ‘the gentry never puts them together.’

‘It cost a heap of money. Still, that doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t like it not to

be quite right. I didn't let Liberty have it all his own way. I was wrong.'

'Yes, sir,' said Lumb, as he walked away, 'it was a pity.'

There was, however, no time to do anything now before the arrival of Sara and her mother, so Mr. Cobbin contented himself with learning experience and ordering tea.

At five o'clock the bell rang, and two cabs full of people and luggage stopped the way. Sara got out first and was followed by her mother and three maids, who all immediately disappeared to explore, whilst Mr. Lumb stood silently by, critically examining his new ladies.

'There's Guardian,' exclaimed Sara, as Mr. Cobbin, feeling very shy, greeted the widow with respect, though he at once felt at his ease with his ward. 'You are kind, and you have done everything and

saved us all the trouble. Mother, look, isn't it a pretty house, considering it is in London, and what nice prints! How did you know I loved pictures? It's like fairy-land! You must be Alladin's genius.'

Mr. Cobbin glanced at Lumb, expecting a look of sympathy, but he found none. Lumb had begun his term of service, and was not to be turned aside from his path of duty. In a few minutes the three were in the drawing-room where the tea-things were laid out, and where new shining silver seemed to be the order of the day.

'Pour it out, Miss Sara,' said Cobbin to his ward; and Sara hastened to the tea table, then suddenly she paused.

'Mother, you'll do it, won't you?'

Mrs. Beddoes hid a slight flush of indignation by looking out of the window. No

one could have even guessed at her resentment as she answered,

‘No, no, I’ve done it long enough.’ She was to be only her daughter’s chaperon, a mere nobody when compared with the heiress, whom this common gold-digger had chosen to make a fuss with. Why could not he leave them alone? But Mrs. Beddoes knew that she was going to share in all these benefits, and so for the present it was better to remain passive. Sara’s delight and Sara’s joy irritated her, but she had too long schooled herself to show her feelings. Besides, the widow had matters of her own to ponder over.

Mr. Cobbin sat still and enjoyed himself vastly by gazing at Sara, and wondering if in all London there was such another vision of beauty. To him Sara appeared like a princess, whom some beneficent god had given into his keeping.

After tea, Sara and her mother examined the house and all it contained with Mr. Cobbin, and his face beamed when his ward praised everything indiscriminately. To tell the truth, Sara's own ideas as to the style of 'Queen Anne and Louey Quatorze' respectively, were extremely hazy, and the union of two ages did not at all oppress her. Mr. Cobbin trembled a little when she approached the drawing-room fender, but Sara only praised the clock and left the offending fender unnoticed. Jethro heaved a sigh of relief. He would of course get that blemish altered for Lumb's sake, but at all events it could not be a very glaring fault if Sara said nothing.

'I think, Mr. Cobbin, you are spoiling Sara,' remarked Mrs. Beddoes, when the inspection was over. 'She must remember that for nearly a year she is still dependent.'

Mr. Cobbin laughed as if the widow had said something extremely amusing.

‘Miss Sara must just enjoy herself, ma’am, if she wishes to please me. You see I’ve no kith, no kin worth the name, and I owe everything to Frank Ferrars. It’s just a pleasure to me to be of use to his cousin.’

‘Sara has not been accustomed to riches,’ replied her mother.

‘No, indeed, I have not. At my uncle’s house we thought it quite strange when we could buy anything new.’

‘Your uncle has been steadily losing his money at farming his own land,’ said Mrs. Beddoes.

‘Yes, and my poor cousin Herringham has to stay there and help in the unprofitable work. When I get my own money, Guardian, I mean to share it with a good many persons.’

‘You won’t find Mr. Profitt easy to manage,’ said Mr. Cobbin, still smiling. ‘He is a lawyer and a half, for all his small voice. A wonderful man, and I find he objects to—to a good many things.’

‘Lawyers always are tiresome,’ said Mrs. Beddoes, raising her eyes to Mr. Cobbin’s face, and wondering when he would go away.

‘Tiresome at times and convenient at times, ma’am. Well, I had better leave you ladies alone; but, Miss Sara, if you will forgive me for saying so,’ he added, shutting one eye and looking at Sara’s neat black dress, ‘there’s something wrong with your dress. It’s not what I’ve seen in the best shops. Of course I don’t know about names and things, but I’ve noticed a deal about ladies’ clothes since I’ve been in London. Remembering your mourning, I only looked at the black stuffs

that were made up, and it seemed to me that there were a lot more bits of things put on to the dresses—beads, I think, and lace, or bits of things.’

Sara sat down beside him, and fairly laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

‘Fancy your looking at the fashions! Of course grand dresses are different to mine, but they cost pounds and pounds.’

‘Oh! is that it! Well, I’ll come round to-morrow, and if you’ll do me the favour, Miss Sara, we’ll go round shopping together.’

He took leave, and as the door shut behind him the widow heaved a sigh of relief.

‘Is this dreadful man going to persecute us always?’

‘Mother! He is so natural and quaint, and then how kind he is. It is a real

pleasure to him to come and arrange everything for us.'

'He will hardly help us to get into society.'

'That won't matter. We have done very well without society all this time, haven't we, dearest? Oh, we shall be very happy. He will go to all the picture-galleries and to concerts with me when you don't want to come; and, mother, may I ask Virginia to come and stay with us? Herringham must come too. He does love pictures so much, and he never sees any good art. He draws so well. Virginia has shown me some of his work.'

'I think the Gwillians would not care to come now when—in fact, Sara, when you are not yet your own mistress.'

Sara's bright face clouded. Why did her mother wish to keep her relations away? She had never appeared to like

the Gwillians, and yet she had allowed her daughter to spend many weeks there. Sara looked at her mother, and wondered if something could make up to her for her past sad life. She must now have time to be happy. In time it would come all right, she settled at last; for Sara's disposition was cheerful and sunny, she not having yet learnt to look at the seamy side of existence.

The rest of the day the mother and daughter were busily engaged in putting their house in order and superintending the new servants. It was all very amusing to Sara, and even Mrs. Beddoes found that, in some ways, wealth is preferable to poverty; but when she sent Sara to bed she took a newspaper out of her bag and gazed long at the death announcements. Gradually as she gazed her brow became less sad, her eyes sparkled, and a smile

seemed to transform all her features ; she was still young and beautiful.

‘It has all come at once,’ she said. ‘Money and freedom. Fate gives us what we want usually when it is too late. But is it too late? Are his children sufficient for him? A man is never constant and yet—and yet——’

For fully an hour she paced up and down the pretty drawing-room trying to solve the question.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER SHINING GOLD.

STACEY HALL, with its art treasures, its marbles from Rome, and its curiosities from all over the world, was now suddenly deserted. A fortnight after Lady Stretton's death, the housekeeper arranged the chairs and tables in holland coverings. The great shutters were closed, and only minute rays of sunlight pierced the melancholy gloom within. On show-days, tourists, having first procured an order from the steward, were taken round by the crape-enveloped housekeeper, who offered them

information in a melancholy tone. The Joshua Reynolds, the Peter Lelys, the Romneys were pointed out with becoming sorrow, which was much heightened when the party reached 'the picture of the late Lady Stretton, aged twenty, painted by Sir John Millais.' 'The Honourable Percival Osborne and the Honourable Clarissa Osborne, as painted by Houless,' were spoken of more cheerfully, as they were still walking in this vale of tears ; indeed, Percival's portrait was one which could not but enliven the spectators, so charmingly had the fashionable painter portrayed him.

'The family were so cut up with the loss of her ladyship that they have gone to live at their London house,' said Mrs. Reddin, 'and it's not known when they'll come back,' she added, shaking her head.

The town house could not be as sad as

was Stacey Hall, but even there, on account of Clara, the gloom hung like a dark pall over the household. She would not be comforted, and she determined that, at all events, she would do nothing to make her father's life cheerful, he having no right to cheerfulness. He had his club, and Percival's presence was a comfort to him, not because he needed personal comfort, but because his daughter's miserable face was a continual reproach. She seemed to him to be the echo of his dead wife, and this echo was not conducive to happiness.

But time covers over even the sad ruins of a proud Babylon, and, as the weeks went on, Clara from looking fierce began to look resigned. She was young, and some interest in the outside world began to creep into her saddened soul.

Percival, who had alone carried his heavy secret with him, found that he must come soon to some understanding with his father. One evening, as the father and son sat together in the London drawing-room, Clara having retired to bed with a headache, Lord Stretton put down his newspaper and looked a few minutes in silence at Percival, who was deeply engaged in reading a book.

‘Percival, my boy, this life is wasting your time. I have been selfish, but now I think it would be better if you thought of taking up your college life, though you know that your presence has been a great comfort to me.’

Percival felt a flush come over his face as he put down his book.

‘I shall not go back to Oxford, father. I was meaning to talk to you about it, but

I did not wish to ask if—if you intended to go back to Stacey, or if—you mean to go on living here.’

‘Not return to Oxford! Indeed you must.’

‘I would rather not leave you. If you go home you will want some one to help you, and if you stay here Clara will be too lonely without me.’

‘I really couldn’t accept that sacrifice, Percival, besides—no, I shall return to Stacey, and I shall find plenty of occupation, more than enough.’

‘You must let me help you.’

‘By and by, certainly; but now—you must see life, and you must take your degree and—and——’

‘I could not leave you and Clara.’

‘Ah! poor Clara. I wish she would reconcile herself to the inevitable, but at least she must get accustomed to—

living alone with me until she marries.'

'I hope she will.'

'And you too, Percival; I shall hope yet to see you settled at Stacey.'

Percival was silent a moment, but during that moment he had a blessed vision of a tall girl with a bright face shaded by beautiful hair, with a smile made to give joy to any man who loved her and whom she loved.

'I wonder if it is really true about that money!' he thought. 'If so, father need not deprive himself of money for me when it is necessary to keep up Stacey, as he is sure to do if I fall in love with a penniless girl. If—I don't believe there is an if. I have never thought of anyone since I saw her. I wonder if Clara would admire her?'

'I should prefer a country life, sir,' he answered, evasively.

‘Yes, that has always been your turn, country and books. A regular bookworm. It will be the first in our family; you inherit that taste from your mother.’

‘Yes, she was very fond of books. She certainly was extremely well read.’

Percival said this quietly and deliberately. He must not let his mother’s name drop out of the family talk, for this name would help him to fight against this invisible and unknown enemy. Who was she, did she really exist, or was it a creation of his poor mother’s brain? If only he could make sure.

‘Your mother was a very cultured woman. Yes, you take after her.’

‘If I were to see a woman I could marry—then I hope, sir, you would welcome her to Stacey, and that there would be no need of our separating.’

‘Of course not, Percival; but you have

seen so little of the world, you can have seen no one to satisfy your ideal.'

'I have been about a good deal in England, but the "grand tour" we might take together, could not we?'

'A good idea. Yes, we must travel. Do you think poor Clara could be persuaded to take to the plan? I wish she could look more cheerful.'

'That will come. When we begin to go out again she will be able to take a less gloomy view of life, I hope.'

'She dislikes any visitors. I asked Colonel Hyslop to dinner to-morrow with us, but I see Clara does not like it.'

Whatever happened, Percival felt that his father must be kept interested in the outer world. Once he had been of a very sociable disposition, but, in the old days, he had given up many things to avoid angry discussions with his wife. Now he

was only just beginning to feel free again. There was an elasticity in his tone, and a brighter look in his eyes, which told plainly that the old buoyancy was returning. Percival wondered at it; his father seemed to him almost a changed man. But if Clara was to thwart all plans for a more sociable life, might not this very gloom make it easier for his father to turn towards 'that woman.' Clara, however, would he knew never hear reason, she would only accuse him of forgetting their mother.

All this passed through Percival's mind, and he felt terribly perplexed. The dead had certainly laid a very heavy burden on the living. Indeed, now that he saw his father still in the prime of life, full of an unused power of enjoyment, his heart misgave him and his conscience tormented him. Why had he ever promised? What

right had he to have done this thing? Happily for him, however, he was soon able to throw off disagreeable thoughts, and to turn his mind towards far more interesting questions. Where was Miss Beddoes? Was this story true? Would there be a chance of meeting her? If she had really come into a fortune, would not a crowd of lovers flock round her? Horrid, mercenary fellows whom her young innocence would not be able to unmask? He must find her out, but how?

Strangely enough the next evening he found the answer he required. Colonel Hyslop came to dinner. He was an old Indian officer, with a weather-beaten face and very kind looking eyes. There was something of the child still remaining in his nature. He was full of fun, and told many stories, good and bad without distinction. He entered the drawing-room of

the Carlton Square house, and was met by Clara robed in crape and looking like a tragedy queen; he felt that he must of necessity bottle up some of his exuberant spirits. This suppressed gas, however, did not remain long in its sealed tube, and by the middle of dinner he was making Lord Stretton and Percival laugh heartily, Clara rewarding him only by a chilly smile. She looked as if she thought it most unfeeling on the part of her father and of her brother to appear so merry. At last the colonel turned towards her remarking,

‘ I assure you, Miss Osborne, my wife and the girls are leading a treadmill life, but it suits them. Daisy comes down every morning at nine o’clock to breakfast with me, though she has often only had four or five hours’ sleep. It’s of no use for us poor old fogies to quote old sayings to the young generation. Proverbs are a

vast mistake. When I begin, the girls always find a proverb with the opposite sentiment to cope with mine. I've given it up.'

'You ruined your daughter's ideas in Simla. Very queer sort of life you old Indians lead out there. Eh! Hyslop, if we are to believe Rudyard Kipling.'

'Believe him! Bless me, not a word of truth in the fellow. Pon my word, I knew a poor devil of a private in my regiment who used to spin yarns for him. Not a word of truth in them, of course.'

'All very well,' said Lord Stretton. 'There's no smoke without fire.'

'My Daisy would find a proverb to prove the opposite. Besides, out there one must keep up one's spirits, or else——'

'Not difficult in your case, Hyslop, I fancy.'

'Difficult! On the contrary, at times I

suffer from great depression. The other evening, for instance, I was in a drawing-room which was more like the Black Hole of Calcutta than anything else that I ever heard of. They say the hostess went with her daughter to order a hundred chairs. "But you have asked two hundred persons, mother," remonstrated the girl, "how shall we get them in?" "That's nothing to do with me," said the hostess. "I ask them, it's their business to get in." Good Lord! our business was the task of a Hercules.'

The Colonel flushed at the recollection.

'You had some compensation, I hope?' said Lord Stretton.

'None—Daisy was cross, and wouldn't tell me the names of the pretty girls. I forgot, there was one she deigned to point out to me—a new star. "The Romance," they call her, but the young men christen her "A Mine of Wealth."

Percival looked up eagerly, and seemed to know what was coming.

‘What is her less romantic name?’ said Lord Stretton.

‘Miss Beddoes, but the romance was in her sudden windfall. ’Pon my word, it’s a real romance. She has got a guardian who has come over from gold-digging, and who follows her like a sheep-dog. You should see what a good time he gets of it. They say that a young man must first square him before he makes up to the girl. It’s funny to see all the penniless rogues making a dead set at her.’

‘I told you it was true, Percival,’ put in Clara. ‘We had heard the story. My brother knows the girl, her people live in our parts.’

‘Do you, Osborne? You lucky dog! Why, she’s as fresh as a daisy and as simple as a—I don’t know any simple things

now-a-days, so the simile breaks down, but the peach will soon lose its bloom.'

'A touch does it,' said Lord Stretton, speaking a little absently; 'two fingers and a thumb. Where is she living?'

'She is a minor as well as a mine-owner at present, just twenty.'

'Oh, then there's time for the swarm to settle.'

'Time! I should think so, but there will be an engagement long before that. They say that the least she will have will be sixty thousand a year, but that is below the mark.'

'Below the mark!'

'Yes, it appears some digger relation discovered a mine by mere chance. He gave this other digger a fourth of it.'

'And what is he doing here?'

'He's guardian to the heiress. It's all legal, and he will go about with her, they

say, much to the disgust of the mother.'

'Her mother?' repeated Lord Stretton.

'Yes. The amusing thing is that several would-be suitors have mistaken the mother for the daughter, and have made love violently to her.'

Percival was somewhat disgusted with the jovial tones of the Colonel, now that they related to Miss Beddoes.

'Is Mrs. Beddoes as pretty as the daughter?' he asked.

'As pretty! A hundred times prettier. When you have said that Miss Dives has lovely hair, a fair skin, and plenty of youth, you have said all. But the mother—upon my word, the mother must have been uncommonly pretty when she was young, and even now she's fascinating.'

'Well, Percival, what do you say to renewing the acquaintance?' said his father.

'I hope you won't do any such thing,'

Clara burst forth. 'You at least, Percival, need not be looked upon as another money-hunter. There are enough already.'

'The farms won't let, don't you know that, Clara?' said Lord Stretton, smiling; but Clara looked scornful, she was in no mood to acknowledge a pleasantry.

'Miss Beddoes is too much of a lady to imagine I should wish to annoy her,' said Percival, with dignity.

'I'm sure of it,' said the Colonel, 'but --ah! Osborne, suitors have to reckon with the mother.'

'I've never seen Mrs. Beddoes, but she is certainly a lady by birth. Her brother, Mr. Gwillian, lives near Stacey, and the Gwillians are a very old family.'

'But poor as church mice,' added Lord Stretton, 'and proud as Lucifer. Where does your "mine of wealth" live, Hyslop?'

Percival mentally noted the address

given by the Colonel, and pondered how he was to find a sufficient excuse for calling there. At this moment, Lord Stretton, glancing towards his son, was struck by an extraordinary thought.

‘ Good heavens ! ’ he mentally ejaculated, ‘ what an idea ! ’

CHAPTER VIII.

MUTUALLY ATTRACTED.

AGAIN chance favoured Percival, and at the very moment when he was full of self-pity. He felt very lonely, in spite of having but little time alone; for he rode out with his father, accompanied him to his club, and occasionally went to picture-galleries with Clara. But such a life, after the delights of Oxford, appeared to him insufferable. Books were now his only solace, for his chief friends were all busily launching their separate boats on the

boundless ocean. He had but few relations, and Clara set her face against the visits of strangers. One day, as he was haunting the neighbourhood of Sara's home, suddenly he found himself face to face with her, and with a man whom he at once felt must be her romantic guardian. As Percival held out his hand to Sara, Jethro gave him a searching glance.

'This is indeed a pleasure, Miss Beddoes. Perhaps you know—— Our deep mourning prevents my sister from paying any visits.'

Percival knew perfectly that it was not only her mourning which prevented or would prevent Clara from noticing the new heiress, but he stretched the point as far as it would go. He noted at once that Sara had just the same bright face, the same fascinating expression in her eyes, and that her hair was of the same colour

as before, for Clara had told him that 'all the vulgar, fashionable girls now dye their hair.'

'How strange that we should meet here,' she said, a slight blush spreading over her face. 'The last time we met was at Chapel Stacey station. I told you then that I was going to college, but I had to give it up.'

'And I have thrown up Oxford,' he said, as if the fact brought him closer to her.

'Oh! Why?—Perhaps I ought not to ask.'

'Because—my father is very lonely now,' said Percival, wondering why he had to give false ideas of the truth, truth being so much easier to him than falsehood.

'Ah, yes, I know. I'm so sorry for you.' Sara's voice was at once full of sweet, womanly sympathy; a rare virtue in these days, and one very charming to

men when they meet with it. 'May I introduce my guardian, Mr. Cobbin, to you? Have you heard——'

'Indeed, your news has been in all the papers.'

Percival greeted Mr. Cobbin with cordiality. He would have been equally cordial to a sweep had she introduced him, but in truth Cobbin's face at once impressed him favourably. There was in it a look of honesty which was by no means common or what he expected to see.

'I think Miss Sara is enjoying herself,' remarked Cobbin, looking at Sara as if he were addressing the Queen, 'and she's bent upon my enjoying myself too; but there's many things beyond my comprehension.'

'Not a bit of it, Guardian. You know we have both enjoyed the Zoo immensely this morning. Don't laugh, Mr. Osborne,

but it is a fact that no one had ever taken me there before, so to-day we left my mother to do a picture-gallery alone, and we went to see our poor relations.'

'I should have liked to go too had I known,' said Percival, laughing.

'Would you? Oh! but you are *blasé*, of course. I know people think I am very countryfied, but it is a fact, and I can't hide it. But do come in, mother will certainly be at home by this time.'

Of course Percival accepted as Mr. Cobbin remarked,

'Miss Sara says she likes the house, even though I chose all the furniture. You may fancy, sir, that, coming as I do from Western Australia, I didn't know just the latest fashions, but I listened. You can learn a deal by listening to the shopkeepers.'

'Oh, you did it beautifully, Guardian,

and then tell Mr. Osborne how Lumb helped you.'

Jethro Cobbin liked to tell that story, because it made Sara laugh; indeed, the two were as merry as children, and Percival caught the infection. It seemed to him that Sara was more perfect than ever, and that she was not at all spoilt by money.

'I suppose you go out a great deal, Miss Beddoes,' he said, remembering Colonel Hyslop's words.

'Yes, indeed, we get a great many invitations, and so does Guardian. He quite enjoys it, and people pay him great attention.'

'That's only because of you, Miss Sara. You see, sir, she enjoys everything so much that people are pleased. I daresay they laugh at me behind my back, but I've got a broad one.'

‘They had better not let me hear them! Mother says I shall never be a society person; fashionable people don’t enjoy themselves. But I was not brought up to understand the code.’

‘You were brought up as everyone should be,’ he said, lowering his voice; but Mr. Cobbin heard him, and as Sara ran up the steps he said,

‘That’s what I say, sir, Miss Sara isn’t even ashamed of me.’

Sara had opened the door with a latch-key, a habit Lumb extremely disapproved of, and led the way upstairs.

‘Mother is not in; I’m so sorry,’ said Sara, entering the drawing-room, and then turning towards Percival. ‘If I had rung the bell, Lumb would have told us, and really I don’t know what we should do without Lumb. He tries to make us walk in the right paths of society, doesn’t he,

Guardian? I hope we are all in one style now. Do you think we are?’

Sara waved her hand round towards the tables and chairs, and Percival laughed more than he had done since his mother's death. At that moment the door-bell rang, and Sara heard her mother's step on the stairs. Percival saw a slight look of anxiety cross the girl's face as she started up to meet her mother.

‘Mother, here is Mr. Osborne; we met him close by, and I asked him to come in.’

Percival felt unusually shy, especially as he saw before him a lady as unlike Sara as it was possible to be. She was tall, certainly, and very pretty, but every line spoke of studied grace. Her face, looking still so young, had but very little animation in it, but the slow glances seemed to take in everything as if by some magic power of their own. For no ap-

parent reason, Percival at once felt chilled. Sara's mother was a woman of the world, and he knew it at once as if by intuition. Notwithstanding this, with a lover's astuteness he determined to make himself pleasant to her. To win Sara he saw that he must win over her mother to his side. He noticed too that Mr. Cobbin was barely included in the conversation, so that Sara's guardian soon took his leave, though first making an appointment to come and fetch the ladies that evening.

‘Mr. Cobbin is very kind in lending us his brougham,’ said Mrs. Beddoes, in a soft, gentle voice which implied many things, except gratitude. Then suddenly she raised her eyes to Percival's face, and looked at him earnestly. ‘You met my daughter at Chapel Stacey, I think.’

‘At the county ball at Walesbury. But I know Mr. Herringham Gwillian—I mean

I have often met him. I hope your uncle is well?' added Percival, turning towards Sara, because he felt utterly chilled by the widow's look.

'Yes, but they look down upon me very much for having forsaken the paths of learning.'

'Sara will soon get tired of this going about,' put in Mrs. Beddoes, quietly.

'As well make hay, then, while the sun shines,' said Percival, wondering if the widow meant what she said, and wishing he was once more walking in the street with Sarah and her original guardian.

'Are you permanently settled in town?' said Mrs. Beddoes, again slowly lifting her eyes towards his face.

'Yes—no, I mean. We have hardly made up our minds. My father pines for his country pursuits; but, on the other hand, we fancy travelling would benefit

my sister. She cannot get over our loss at all.'

'It must have been a great shock for you all,' answered Mrs. Beddoes, softly.

Percival now felt that he could not with politeness stay longer, so he rose to go, wondering how he was to find another excuse for a speedy return. Sara rose too, her manner appeared to be rather constrained in her mother's presence.

'I am glad you did not tell of me, Mr. Osborne,' she said, smiling.

'About?'

'About the Zoo! To-morrow we are going to visit the Tower. Mr. Cobbin enjoys himself immensely, and so do I. It is no pretence, but mother——'

'I think you might inform your mind a little more,' said the widow.

'I have done that so long; besides, Guardian knows a good deal about wild

beasts, so that he was charmed with them.'

The widow stood up, and Percival now noticed how beautifully she was dressed.

'Will you excuse my sister for not calling upon you?' he said, holding out his hand. The second white lie seemed easier than the first, but suddenly those drooping lids were raised, and looking straight at him convicted him of sin.

'Certainly, I quite understand.'

She shook hands with him, but she did not invite him to come again. Percival felt that he had failed to captivate Sara's mother. Then for one moment he held Sara's hand, and she looked at him and he at her. Something in their natures which were guileless, something which assured them that they could trust each other, made each pause one unmeasured instant, then with that strong, firm conviction peculiar to youth, they felt that there was

an invisible tie between them, which they must needs acknowledge and take into account. Sara's lips parted. She was going to ask him to come again, but the soft rustle of her mother's dress closed her lips. Young people instinctively know what their elders do not wish them to do. The next instant her own judgment had rallied to her mother's side.

‘Of course I mustn't show I like him,’ she thought, ‘it's not the thing. How tiresome! but I do like him very much. He is the best man I have ever met. He is just a perfect gentleman, and then how nice he was to Guardian.’

She did not, however, again look at him, but the first glance had been enough, and Percival walked home as though he trod on enchanted ground.

The dull London house seemed illuminated by Sara's presence, though now

seen only through his imagination, and even Clara's dark, sad face could not put out that light. Lord Stretton, himself, noticed the change in his son, and was more cheerful in consequence.

When they were at last alone, Percival could not resist making a confidant of his father.

'By-the-way, father, I met Miss Beddoes to-day, and she had the old digger with her. He is a delightful and honest specimen of the race, and quite devoted to her. He reminded me of a big, soft-hearted Newfoundland dog.'

'You met them to-day? How strange! What is the girl like?'

'Oh, you know, I've seen her before, and she isn't altered a scrap by her wealth. I fancy the guardian must be running the concern till she comes of age.'

'Extraordinary!'

‘ Well, not more so than—many other things one hears of; and, after all, she is of gentle birth, and not a tallow-chandler’s daughter.’

‘ But they were very poor.’

‘ Poverty is highly fashionable now-a-days. By the way, I wish Clara would call on them, but I suppose she will say that it is impossible.’

‘ Quite impossible.’

‘ Oh, well, I thought it might be nice for Miss Beddoes to have some recognition from her uncle’s neighbours.’

‘ Clara could hardly call on the niece now when—your mother never even bowed to the uncle.’

‘ You see, mother belonged to an old-fashioned set. Her people were very exclusive, but it isn’t the fashion now. Some of the nicest fellows at Oxford had no family worth the name.’

‘ It’s all very well for a man, but women are more particular,’ said Lord Stretton.

Percival turned the conversation. If his family would not help him in this matter, he must trust to his own exertions. So it happened that, the next day, he felt an extraordinary desire to visit the Tower. He even said to himself that it was a place full of historical associations, which a young man ought to know thoroughly. There were fine views from the Governor’s windows, and, as he knew the Governor, he might ask him to show Miss Beddoes things not seen by the ordinary sight-seer. That evening, instead of reading attentively, Percival plotted and conjured up divine visions, and the result was that the next morning found him on his way to the Tower of London.

CHAPTER IX.

SIGHTS OF LONDON.

To be honestly and entirely in love, to believe that you have seen the one and the only woman you will ever marry, to feel that she is not altogether indifferent to your plain-spoken, if silent, admiration, to see that the future can place but few obstructions in your path of love, and that one word from her may make the present glorious—all this is certainly enough to make a young man decidedly at peace with himself and with the whole world. Such was the case with Percival on his return

from the Tower of London. When Sara and Mr. Cobbin entered the Tower precincts, and were taken possession of by a Beefeater, the Australian was as pleased as a boy of ten with everything that was shown him. But the sudden appearance of Percival made Sara's guardian extremely anxious to examine strange armour, of which he could not guess the use, and to go down on hands and knees in order to try to decipher undecipherable inscriptions, thus leaving the young people plenty of opportunity for private conversation. First they discussed trivial facts, then they passed to trivial thoughts, and from these again they branched off towards their separate ideals.

Sara was too genuine to pretend, even to herself, that she did not guess his secret, but she rebuked her imagination by thinking:

‘It is only a fancy on his part, of course. I am not half good enough or grand enough for him, and he would be the last to care about money. Anyhow, if he cares it isn’t for my money, because—because I rather think, indeed I am almost sure, that he liked me the first time we met, and I know that I liked him then. I wish I was a great lady, and then—and then——’

During the happy time when they wandered round the old enclosure, where so many hearts had throbbed with hopeless despair, these two only felt that heaven was being brought slowly down for their inspection. Mr. Cobbin looking on chuckled to himself and peered into minute dark dungeons, pretending to be vastly interested in mediæval prison life.

‘It’s as plain as Westminster Tower clock,’ he thought. ‘This young man is smitten with Sara, and if I know anything

Sara is with him. By Jenkyns! they are just suited to one another. Lord! what luck the girl has, and she deserves it too. She don't mind me at all, and lets me see it all just as if I was a real relation. She is certainly the nicest girl in England, but I see farther than she does, and I see that Sara's mother's got that dark man in view, and Sara is as innocent as a babe. I'll eat my head if the widow doesn't mean him to marry Sara. He's one of your clever mushroom men. Gambles, I expect, but the widow's blind as a bat and seems very fond of him, and my Miss Sara will have a fight for it! Why, it's Mr. Greenwood here, there, and everywhere, and don't he hate me like poison! Lord! Well now, perhaps I'm wrong, perhaps the widow is wanting this Mr. Greenwood for herself. Of course that's it, so Sara's little romance can spin along at a fine rate, just as it

should. Best not interfere. Lord! how they do get on! They talk of young aristocrats that are worth nothing, but this one is worth quite a tidy gold-mine.'

Whilst Jethro Cobbin was thus meditating, Sara had reached the stage of giving sympathy to Percival.

'I wish I could see my way clearly to doing something worth doing, but at present nothing is clear to me except that my place is by my father's side,' he said.

'But of course you will take your degree,' said Sara, who had correct ideas about degrees.

'No, I can't go back to Oxford. My father cannot spare me.'

'Won't he really spare you?'

'I mean, I should not like to leave him.'

Sara paused, and then she turned the conversation fancying that Percival had rather morbid views about his duty.

‘Are you named after Wagner’s Parsifal ;
Is it the same name?’

‘Yes, I suppose it is. My mother was a great musician, but I know nothing of music. You know that the original author of Parsifal dedicated his poem to a lady whose name he would not reveal. That was a chance worth having.’

Percival looked up quickly at Sara, and Sara felt certain that, given he wrote a work of art, he would choose her as the lady of his dedication.

‘I wonder,’ she said, suddenly, ‘if there are some people whose lives are always happy—quite exempt from trouble, I mean.’

‘You deserve all the happiness that you get, and more too,’ he said, with the thoughtless generosity of a lover.

‘How do you know that?’ said Sara laughing. ‘Sometimes I wonder at my

own identity. You see what a nice kind guardian I have. Real good! Then it is such a happiness living with my mother and trying to make up to her for her sad life. She was not happy when she was young.'

'But she had you.'

'We have never lived much together. She has been very self-denying. I was nearly always with the Gwillians. She thought it more cheerful for me. I love them dearly, you know.'

'And now you will plunge into the whirl of this stupid society!' Percival felt dreadfully jealous of society.

'It is all very exciting, but still—I shall soon be tired of it, and I shall pine for a country life and for books; in fact, for just a life of an ordinary common-place mortal.'

'You will soon get the taste for the

other life, and then your views will change.'

'No, I am sure they will not. You see, I am not a beauty, so it's really for my money—or rather the money I shall have—that people are kind to me now. One can't help remembering that, and when I stop to think of it, it rather spoils society.'

'You will soon forget that.'

'No, I can't. I feel that people envy me, and whilst they are saying pretty things to me they are wishing that they had my luck.'

'Envy, you think, can't hide itself?'

'They envy Guardian and then they look down upon him. If they really knew him they might really envy him. He is so good, so simple, so devoted.'

'Devoted to you. I am not surprised!'

These words were said in a low voice.

'It is only for my cousin's sake. I love him for his own.'

‘And you think everyone envies you?’

‘I hope not everyone, but still—what does it matter? You see, I have several buffers between me and the world.’

Percival knew he was doing an unheard-of thing, but he half murmured,

‘You will include me amongst them?’

‘You?’

Sara’s face rivalled a red rose, but at this moment Jethro Cobbin, having closely examined all the dungeons till he could barely open his eyes in the daylight, returned to the neighbourhood of the young people.

‘Our strange conductor wants to move on, Miss Sara,’ he said, apologetically.

‘Oh, yes, of course—I’m quite ready.’

Percival had entirely forgotten the views to be seen from the Governor’s house, and had no wish to go near to it.

‘Is there any other sight you would like

to see this morning, Miss Sara?' asked Jethro.

'You have never seen the People's Palace,' answered Sara, hurriedly.

'It's true, I've never seen it.'

'Neither have I,' said Percival, eagerly.

'Then let's go,' said Sara, excitedly.

The great hall delighted them all, but Jethro discreetly found that he was most anxious to examine the technical workshops, so the two were again left alone, and Percival determined to waste no more time.

'You did not answer me just now.'

He spoke in a low voice.

'Because—oh, I am afraid you are only—you mean to make me a pretty speech, but I told you that I am not yet accustomed to—society ways.'

'Don't be afraid, I hate society ways, and I never mean to be a despicable fool

who doesn't know his own mind. If you had not had sixpence, as soon as I could I was going to ask you to—— Why not say it? I loved you at first sight. I tried to put it away from me because of my work: I wanted to win distinction in order to have something to offer you, but then came my mother's death—and all that sadness. I had to put away all thought of myself, and just then I was rather bowled over by hearing of your sudden wealth. But I couldn't help it, could I? and I wasn't going to let that stand in the way, though for some time to come I am afraid I must be dependent on my father. Oh, don't look away—forgive me, I know I'm doing an unheard-of thing, but after all you and I are the people it most concerns, and it seems to me to be more natural to speak out face to face with each other, doesn't it? If you care at all, I'll wait and wait and

be satisfied. I don't want to interfere with your pleasure. I want you to enjoy everything, and to let me keep everything bad away from you. I'm not half good enough for you, I know, but I offer you a whole heart and all I have, even though now I shall never be able to distinguish myself.'

He paused, his back was against one of the great Caryatides, and Sara was close beside him with her face half-averted.

'But, but—' she stammered, and paused.

'Don't be afraid of me, say exactly what you wish to say. I shall know it's all right if you do it. Foolish misunderstandings are despicable things; it is much better to be plain and straightforward in life always.'

Sara knew that her face must look like a pink peony. She felt so proud to be the chosen of this man, himself endowed with

a perfectly straightforward, simple nature, incapable of deceit. She had won this love before her money had come to her; she did not doubt this for one instant, for in a mysterious way she had almost realised it on the night of the ball.

‘ I am afraid you don’t know me, and—’

‘ Don’t I? Well, anyhow I have a right intuition. Will you trust me with your life, Sara? It seems so presumptuous of me to ask you such a thing, only——’

‘ Only, I want to trust you with it,’ said Sara, suddenly turning towards him and giving him her hand as they stood near the Caryatides, ‘ but I can’t believe it.’

‘ What? about me, dearest? You seemed so far off even yesterday, and now, and now——Do you really, really mean it, darling? because I don’t feel as if I could face life if it is to be only a dream.’

‘ Mean it? Yes, of course I mean it;

why do you doubt me? Only what will Lord Stretton think of it?’

‘And your mother, what will she think of me?’

‘Mother will feel that I am a very fortunate individual.’

‘And my father is too good and too indulgent to refuse me anything; besides, you forget, darling, that you are a much sought after person.’

‘And mother will have a son! Sometimes I fancy that she would have been happier with a son. She does not lean on me as she would on a man.’

‘Sara dearest, shall we tell him?’ said Percival, nodding towards Jethro Cobbin, who was just then intently examining a picture.

‘That would be delightful—but no, I had better tell mother first. She might be hurt.’

‘ You think of everyone, darling, but I want you all to myself. There is so much that I want to tell you, and I wasted all the time at the Tower. Give me your hand, sweetest. Promise me that—you won’t forget me when you are in that society whirlpool where I can’t follow you yet.’

‘ Oh, society will be like water on a duck’s back to me,’ she said smiling, and in a young dream of happiness trying to realize that she and Percival loved each other.

By this time the inexorable moments had fled, it was time to go home, as Cobbin all too soon came to inform them.

‘ If we are late, your mother will not trust me again,’ he said, deprecatingly.

‘ You have given us a perfect morning,’ said Percival.

‘ And Miss Sara is looking blooming,’ he answered, chuckling.

‘That’s because I feel as happy as it is possible to be,’ she replied as they entered the train, and then all the way home Jethro Cobbin found it necessary to take great interest in the view, but this pleasure like all other pleasures came all too soon to an end.

CHAPTER X.

UNEXPECTED LUCK.

WHILST Sara was metaphorically lying on a bed of roses, Mrs. Beddoes was sitting in a pretty drawing-room bending over an embroidery frame. She was working a stole for the curate in charge of the little mission church close by. He had called upon her very soon after her arrival, and, like many other curates in charge or out of charge, he had found Mrs. Beddoes extremely fascinating. He had called her 'a charming, saintly woman, perfectly un-

worldly.' 'Other women,' he remarked, 'suddenly raised above all pecuniary cares, would have had their heads turned, but this one is a widow indeed.'

Mrs. Beddoes had set to work on the stole as the result of the second interview with him, and now that it was nearly completed it was a beautiful piece of art needlework. Lucy Beddoes had certainly changed from the Lucy Beddoes who not long ago had daily walked demurely down Willington's one long street. She had always been pretty, but now the slight look of anxiety clinging to the white forehead had vanished entirely. An extremely charming smile could often be seen on her lips, and she did not now raise her eyelids quite as deliberately as she had done formerly. Altogether, the widow was more attractive because more animated than she had been for years.

She could easily think of other things as she worked, because she was only what workers call 'filling in.' Her soft brown hair was coiled low down on her head, touching the slender column of her neck. Her pale, very pale blue eyes had an infantine look in them which conquered curates, and even caused men of the world to speculate whether her virtues were indigenous, for these men knew to their cost that candour can be imported. She had at last discarded the minute widow's cap, and looked now nearly as young as her daughter and very much more ethereal; for Sara's good looks were of the youthful, healthy type. Her mother's face had a tendency to look pathetic when not idealised by a smile, and her figure was still perfect. As she sat working, evidently weaving in her thoughts with her stitches, she made a very womanly picture, a picture

which required an onlooker, and indeed she was expecting one, for every few minutes Mrs. Beddoes looked at the clock.

She had a good visual memory, and the picture which she now filled in mentally took the form of Percival Osborne. She saw him as plainly as if he were before her, and she noted every particular of the well-grown, manly figure of the young Englishman, the best type of a race which some tell us is fast becoming extinct. She could find no fault with him, though she allowed herself to despise a being so simple and so straightforward as this one appeared to be. The boyish candour, still so apparent, could not belie the rest of the character, and evidently the complex element in it was entirely non-existent.

‘Her son,’ she thought, ‘her son,—who could have guessed that he should fall in with my daughter! He doesn’t even want

her money, it is pure love.' Her lips lost their smile and were slightly pressed together, an evident sign of a strong character. 'Sara thinks that she has but to wish for a thing now and that it will fall into her lap. It is ridiculous to talk of Providence, there is no such thing, nothing but blind, foolish fate. We have to carve out our destinies. That is true, at all events, if nothing else is certain. Suppose I had married James Colborne, I should have cut the true thread of my life. He never could understand why I refused him.'

She smiled again now, a smile some would designate as heavenly, forgetting that there are smiles in hell. It was caused by the remembrance of the unreasoning devotion of this special lover, for the widow had steered through several love affairs, which she had so well concealed that, even if suspected of having

admirers, no one had ever blamed her. 'She was just the sort of woman a man couldn't resist,' was the feminine way of making light of her charm of manner. The modern woman, or the new woman, or the woman with a decided turn for flirting, was as far removed from the outward and visible personality of Lucy Beddoes as was the fast and fashionable lady of society.

Lucy never lowered a man's higher nature, on the contrary she entirely satisfied it, and to many she had appeared to be the one perfect being belonging to the feminine order. To such she was so far from appearing to be masterful that, on the contrary, she always created in the manly breast a desire to protect her. When she had sorrowfully refused to marry a devoted lover she never hurt his feelings, rather she left him with the conviction that for her sake he would in the future live an ideal

life, guided by an ideal star shining far above him in a pure sky.

There was only one man who had been troubled and perplexed as to the real character of his ideal. Being very much in love, he had in vain endeavoured to force a 'yes' from her lips; then all at once he turned upon her, and, like a prophet, suddenly filled with a new spirit of divination, he accused her of having lured him on to his destruction. Lucy distinctly remembered how she had called to her help a special reserve of calmness, and how she had softly answered,

'When did I ever do that? Tell me when? What did I say? On what do you base your cruel accusation?'

In trying to particularize, the lover's courage forsook him; her words were true, he could not remember one single instance when Lucy had said what was blamable,

not one. How can a man, made of coarse clay, accuse a woman of a turn of the head, of the slow lifting of eyelids, of movements so gentle and so graceful that they would by many be taken as the type of Madonna characteristics. This man had not answered one word, he had risen and gone forth from her presence condemned by his silence, till once more alone, free or partially free from her subtle influence, he had exclaimed aloud,

‘ Good God ! the devil did not tempt Eve, that is a mere coarse symbol, Eve herself was the devil incarnate.’

This was four years ago, and Lucy seldom dwelt upon the incident. She preferred dreaming mentally of the Rev. James Colborne, who had said that she was his Jacob’s ladder to heaven ; only, when rejected, he found himself unable to exist near the ladder, so he had effected

an exchange of livings, vowing to remain a bachelor.

‘ Mr. Gaythorne Greenwood,’ said Lumb, suddenly interrupting her meditation and her stole.

Lumb’s voice was rather severe ; he had taken a dislike to this gentleman, and Lumb showed his dislikes by a severe intonation of voice whilst announcing the visitor’s name.

Lucy rose slowly and gracefully to receive her guest. He was a society man, one of those delightful men of about thirty-seven, of whose antecedents no one knows anything, except that they are still single. They are always asked out everywhere and are to be seen everywhere ; they are courted and petted by fashionable ladies, because other fashionable ladies court and *fête* them, and because it is the right thing to know them. A man who has

made this sort of reputation is much to be envied. No one knows his income, and one expects anything of him except to appear and to allow himself to be made much of. He is always supposed to be the younger son of somebody of consequence who is, however, always nameless, though sometimes the name of a well-known man is given as being his 'cousin.' As he knows everybody, his conversation never flags, and need never turn or fall back upon 'his own people.' Indeed at last a romance is composed purely in his honour, and he is said to have refused to marry an ugly heiress. Thus he acquires the much-prized virtue of disinterestedness, so that heiresses are looked upon as beings who will have to propose to him if they happen to fall in love with him, but who will never have the honour of an offer of marriage from him.

Gaythorne Greenwood had met Mrs. and Miss Beddoes, and had been, not exactly fascinated, as many of his betters had been, but impressed by the widow's appearance.

Mrs. Beddoes soon discovered that this charming man was attracted by Sara's unsophisticated personality, but even Lucy, however, had not yet discovered whether in truth Mr. Greenwood was attracted by herself, or by Sara's self, or by Sara's money. She had asked him several times to drive, to lunch, and to tea, in order to discover this secret—an important one to her—and she hoped soon to satisfy herself on this point; but then Lucy was not the only clever individual in town. Gaythorne Greenwood was her equal, or so he imagined.

'I am so glad to see you,' said Mrs. Beddoes, 'it is so kind of you to come and

see two stupid women when so many clever people want you.'

Gaythorne made a charming bow as he answered,

'The kindness is all on your side.'

'Is it?' (Lucy's smile was enough to turn the head of any ordinary man.) 'Now I think a widow with one girl is placed in a very difficult position, especially when for so long she has lived out of the world.'

'The world has too long been deprived of a great pleasure.'

'Men flatter us very easily.' Lucy looked down, and thoughtfully gazed at her clasped hands.

'The chariot wheels of life certainly run more smoothly if fortune paves the way,' said Gaythorne, crossing his legs, and looking with the eyes of a connoisseur at the charming figure before him. 'What

a pity the fortune passed her over,' he thought. 'I should have preferred the widow, the daughter has no surprises about her character.'

'You mean Sara's life,' and Lucy sighed softly. 'When she is happily married, I shall have very little anxiety left; but, of course, I know that——'

'That Miss Beddoes will be a most sought after prize,' said Gaythorne, lightly, as if for him prizes were unknown quantities.

'Yes, and I know there are so few disinterested men.'

'Very few.' Gaythorne smiled.

'And those few are easily recognized.'

'Good heavens!' thought Gaythorne, 'she can't mean me! Is it a trap laid for me?' But his courage never forsook him, and he answered,

'I don't know. A man who is insen-

sible to money must have some very strong motive to despise wealth; unless indeed he is already a millionaire.'

'Some men find that they get on as well without money as with it,' said Lucy, thoughtfully. 'In your case, for instance, Mr. Greenwood, no one knows or cares if you are rich or poor.'

'I have not yet made acquaintance with the bankruptcy court,' said Gaythorne Greenwood, laughing pleasantly. His manner was like that of a man whose substantial balance at his banker's helps him to laugh about improbable poverty.

'I shall indeed be happy if Sara can ever find disinterested affection. At present——'

At this moment Mr. Greenwood felt secretly disconcerted. What was the widow's meaning? He could not imagine that she really wished to accept

him as the lover of the heiress. His wildest hopes had not allowed him to foresee such an easy victory. He had great belief in his own discernment, and was, therefore, not much pleased to find that he had 'lost the trail.'

'At present do you think disinterested affection like the philosopher's stone, purely a product of the imagination?'

'I thought so till——' Lucy broke off, but she slowly lifted her eyes and looked gently at Mr. Greenwood.

'No,' he said to himself, and mentally addressing her, 'you cannot really make me believe that you have discovered that unfindable individual in me. The charming Sara would find a hundred lovers more disinterested than Gaythorne Greenwood, who is at his wit's end for money.' The very idea made his undefined and smouldering hopes burst into flame. He

ran through a whole labyrinth of possibilities. So doing he forgot to answer Mrs. Beddoes's last remark, and she continued,

‘No one has ever accused you of fortune-hunting, Mr. Greenwood.’

‘If *you* do not, that is enough for me.’

‘If only I could believe that Sara would ever find a lover as disinterested as you are, I should——’

‘She will have no difficulty in doing that,’ said Mr. Greenwood, with a mental smile.

‘Because?’

Mr. Greenwood was simply amazed at the words which fell from the lips of Mrs. Beddoes.

‘Because there must be many more who feel as anxious as I do to take care of her interests.’

‘Yes, I know it,’ said Lucy very softly,

and without looking up, 'but you must be very, very tender with her; you must not frighten her, she is very young.'

'I place myself entirely in your hands.'

Gaythorne felt as if he were acting a play.

'You are very good.'

She looked straight at him now, and Gaythorne Greenwood was utterly at a loss to imagine whether he had taken her in or whether she had deceived him. He only realized that the faint hopes he had nursed of securing Sara's fortune were unexpectedly encouraged by her own mother, and not only encouraged, but, as it were, hurried to maturity. This piece of good fortune appeared so much like the delusion of a wild dream that he doubted his own identity. For one moment he fancied that the widow had taken a personal liking to himself and was working through her

daughter; but no, that again seemed impossible. If she wished to marry again, and to marry him—his vanity not making the wish seem at all unnatural—she would hardly bait him with a fortune whose magnitude was the subject of common gossip. On the other hand, did she plan that a very easy-going husband would willingly share all Sara's good things with her? He mentally pulled himself together, and tried to judge wisely. He had several times tried to win an heiress, but the parents had never been cordial when Mr. Greenwood's affairs had been even partially examined.

'If you even thought me worthy to take care of one of the most charming women I have met——,' he began, and then he wondered whether he really meant Sara or her mother.

'Worthy? Why, Mr. Greenwood, if

there is a man I have heard well spoken of, it is you.'

'And are you willing to accept the verdict of society?'

'I know of no better test.'

'Good heavens!' he thought, 'as if society believed its own verdicts! No, the widow is not so deep as I expected, she is a simpleton, and is taken in by my fictitious reputation.'

'Your judgment will weigh with Miss Beddoes, I know, and also I hope with her strange guardian.'

Lucy's foot gave a silent tap on the carpet.

'He is indeed a strange man. It is a great misfortune to Sara to have that legacy left to her.'

'Well, of course, he is a strange fish; still, I assure you, Mrs. Beddoes, that society has received him uncommonly

kindly. You see, originality goes for something.'

'With those who have no connection with it.'

Gaythorne laughed. He certainly felt much more interest in Mrs. Beddoes than in Sara, but that was merely a personal matter and not worthy of consideration. At this moment there was a sound of cab wheels. They stopped at the door. Mrs. Beddoes rose and stood by Gaythorne, who came a step nearer to her. He was a very handsome man and his personal appearance was extremely pleasant to the eyes.

'That must be Sara—and the guardian! He is entirely devoid of tact.'

'Quite a common failing, I assure you. The exceptions are to be highly prized.'

He looked down on the soft hair and pretty neck. There was a pause. Lucy stooped down over her embroidery frame

and fastened an idle needle securely. Gaythorne thought that she looked like one of Watteau's figures, so graceful was her outline and so enchanting the locks that curled above the neck. Suddenly she rose and came close to him.

'Thank you very much, Mr. Greenwood. We understand each other, don't we?'

'Indeed we do,' was his answer, followed by the mental words, 'indeed we don't.'

'You will try to win Sara's love so that she may return your disinterested affection?'

Again he staggered, again he wondered which of them was playing a part.

'I shall be entirely guided by you.'

'You will succeed if you try. Failure and Gaythorne Greenwood are strangers to each other.'

'Ah, if that were so!'

‘I know it.—You have lifted a heavy weight from my mind.’

There was no time for more. The door opened, and the radiant Sara walked into the room followed by her guardian.

‘Mother dear, we have had the most delightful morning! I never in all my life enjoyed myself so much.’

‘I am afraid you have kept Mr. Greenwood waiting for luncheon, Sara.’

‘Will you forgive me, Mr. Greenwood? If you had been to the Tower and to the People’s Palace——’

‘Of course I should share your present enthusiasm! As it is, we have been sighing for your return. Was this your first sight of our ancient prison, Mr. Cobbin?’

‘I must own to sharing Miss Sara’s delight, but the armour struck me as being too small for full-grown Englishmen.’

‘ We were minors in those days, we had not reached man’s estate.’

‘ Too much prison fare,’ said Cobbin, laughing loudly.

Lucy winced.

‘ We go farther and fare worse,’ said Mr. Greenwood, with a brilliant smile.

‘ Did you fare worse this morning, Miss Sara?’

Sara blushed, but hid her blushes in a bunch of flowers which she carried in her hand, and which Percival had just given to her.

‘ Mr. Greenwood is going to drive with us this afternoon,’ said Mrs. Beddoes; and Mr. Cobbin felt himself dismissed.

When he left the house after luncheon, Sara ran down the stairs with him.

‘ Guardian, I’ll tell mother how much we enjoyed ourselves to-day, and to-morrow will you——’

‘ I’ll come to-morrow, Miss Sara, and hear the news.’

He shook her hand cordially.

‘ Yes, do, please. Oh, Guardian, I’m so happy.’

‘ That’s right, Miss Sara. By Jenkyns, you look it too!’

‘ I wish Mr. Greenwood would go, but—’

‘ Shall we meet Mr. Osborne to-morrow, Miss Sara?’

‘ Of course we shall. Good-bye.’

CHAPTER XI.

GO-BETWEENS.

THAT evening the two ladies returned from a ball at which Sara had danced several times with Mr. Greenwood. She loved dancing, and her mother had invited Mr. Greenwood to go with them, so that Sara's pleasure and her duty had gone hand in hand. She was radiant, and in consequence she looked twice as beautiful as she had done a week ago. There was a fire in Mrs. Beddoes's room, for the night was chilly. The maid retired as Sara knocked at her mother's door.

‘Mother, I’ve not seen you alone one minute since this morning. Darling, how pretty you look! Oh, I wish it were you.’

Sara, arrayed in a pale-green dressing-gown, sank down on a stool at her mother’s feet. Her complexion was like delicate porcelain, though slightly marred by freckles. The brows, delicately marked out by light-brown eyebrows, gave an indescribable softness to the face. Sara appeared suddenly to have grown older, and to be a woman to-night. Her mother remarked it in silence.

‘You wish what, Sara?’

‘That you had really known what happiness means. You told me, don’t you remember? that you did not marry for love. How cruel of your father to make you! Do tell me about it; but first, mother, I must tell you he loves me.’

Mrs. Beddoes gave a little start.

‘Loves you? Did he tell you so to-night?’

‘To-night? How could he?’

‘When you were dancing.’

‘Oh, he wasn’t there.’

‘Not there! Mr. Greenwood!’

‘Mr. Greenwood! That very clever, fashionable Mr. Greenwood! What an idea! No, mother, Mr. Osborne.’

‘Mr. Osborne! Sara, what do you mean?’ Lucy did not smile at all, and Sara suddenly felt that something was wrong.

‘I forgot, you haven’t any idea of it. I believe it was really love at first sight on both sides, mother. It was at the Walesbury Ball which I went to with Herringham and Virginia. My first ball, mother. Percival had gone with some neighbours, and he says that——’

‘Do you mean Lord Stretton’s son,

Percival Osborne, the young man who came here?’

‘Of course I do. Are there two Mr. Osbornes?’ Sara was a little disconcerted.

‘You are talking nonsense, Sara. Lord Stretton would never dream of letting his son marry you.’

‘Why not? Oh, he is very fond of his son.’

‘Is he? All the more reason. Besides, Sara, unless he wishes to marry you for the money that is coming, I am sure there is nothing in it.’

‘But, indeed, mother, indeed you don’t understand. Percival is—oh, he will come, and you will know. Of course I know it is wonderful, but what is more wonderful is that my money has made no earthly difference to him.’

‘My dear Sara, you are too young and too innocent. Do you believe this?’

‘Believe it—why not?’ Sara’s face grew deadly pale.

‘Because you do not understand life at all. Lord Stretton will never give his consent. I know him well.’

‘You know him? You have never mentioned him.’

‘I met him when I was your age at the same ball.’

‘But he didn’t fall in love with you! That makes all the difference! But indeed, mother dear, Percival is a man you will be very fond of.’

‘Sara, you know I have had a sad life. It would be sadder still if I had not learnt much from experience. To save you foolish sorrow, let me tell you at once that you will never be the future Lady Stretton.’

‘I don’t care a farthing about that, but I shall be Mrs. Osborne.’

‘Never, Sara.’

Mrs. Beddoes rose slowly and leant her elbow on the mantelpiece. As she did so, she faced a looking-glass and gazed at her own reflection. Sara, still sitting on the stool, her hands clasped round her knees, looked strangely natural in comparison with her mother. She laughed now.

‘Who can prevent it? Percival is as good as gold,—besides, we can wait. If his father scorns us, Percival never will. Of course we were poor, and the money is a mere chance, but Percival said his father would come and see you.’

The face which was studying its own expression saw a slight contraction of the brows, and the lips were firmly pressed together. It was a beautiful, womanly woman Mrs. Beddoes was looking at.

‘You think you are in love. When I

was young I was like you, I believed a foolish thing, but I assure you it will wear off.'

Sara gave a little cry.

'Oh, mother, you have not been happy, you don't understand, but I believe that even now you could learn happiness.'

'No daughter of mine shall marry into a family that does not welcome her. I know only too well what that means.'

'I am sure you are wrong, mother. Lord Stretton is very good-natured. He is easily persuaded by Percival. His sister Clara isn't very amiable, I fancy, though Percival didn't say so; but she can have nothing to do with our love.'

'Lord Stretton will never give his consent, Sara, and without it you shall not marry his son.'

Sara rose to her feet. Her face was pale, her hands trembled, she could not realize

much except that Lord Stretton must be a very wicked man.

‘Percival will come to-morrow,’ she said, not knowing much what else to say.

‘Sara, I must say it again, you are very young. I have wished to save you real pain by telling you at once. Don’t you believe me when I assure you that it is wisest and best to turn your mind at once from this—affair. There is another man who, from the highest and most disinterested motives, is unwilling to tell you of his love—I promised to do it for him.’

‘Another!’ said Sara, scornfully.

‘Yes—Mr. Greenwood loves you. You are indeed fortunate to have attracted such a thorough gentleman, and such a very clever, good——’

‘Mother! What nonsense! Mr. Greenwood wouldn’t care a scrap about me.’

‘He does, he loves you.’

‘ Well, I’m sorry—of course you will tell him so, tell him about Percival.’

‘ Sara, you will tire me out. I am very weary. Go to bed, dear, and think better of all this by the morning.’

‘ Mother, you don’t understand. We—we—are engaged.’

‘ Indeed, you are not engaged. Lord Stretton will never allow such an engagement, neither shall I.’

‘ Mother, mother dear, you don’t mean it?’

‘ I do certainly—unless Lord Stretton allows it.’

Sara smiled.

‘ Oh! but I know he will, so I won’t make myself unhappy. Good-night, mother.’

Sara stooped a little and put her face against Lucy’s soft contour. Suddenly the young girl burst into tears.

‘Silly child—good-night. Don’t be so—so—young.’

‘I am silly. Of course it’s all right. Lord Stretton will allow it! Why shouldn’t he?’

In consequence of various interruptions and other causes it was about the same time in the evening that Percival was able to get hold of his father to announce the same news to him. Lord Stretton had come early from the club, feeling slightly tired with life in general, when he was met by Percival’s request.

‘Come into the library, father. I want a word with you.’

‘Certainly, my boy. What is it? Has Clara made London too gloomy for you?’

‘I am afraid Clara is dull, but it isn’t that. I ought—no, I mean, you know that I met Miss Beddoes the other day? Well,

I met her again to-day and proposed to her.' Percival brought out his news at once.

'Proposed to Miss Beddoes! Good heavens! You, Percival,—the girl will be a gold-mine, they say.'

'Yes, she hasn't got her money yet. It will be nearly a year before she really comes into her fortune, but I want you to——'

'To give my consent?' Lord Stretton laughed a little. 'Certainly it is startling news. Clara mustn't hear it. She will think that you are heartless, considering your deep mourning.'

'Yes, I fear she will, but indeed it isn't that. I fell in love at first sight at the Walesbury ball, and I was only waiting to take my degree before telling you and her my feelings about it.'

'That's why we heard nothing more of

Oxford! Well, it's a pity, Percival.'

'No—indeed that was not the reason, but say you will give your consent. You will——'

'Consent! Has she accepted?'

'Yes, sir. Of course I think that she is quite the nicest girl on earth. If it wasn't that I know a heap of fellows will be after her money I would have waited to propose to her.'

'Then in your eyes money is no object?'

'Of course not, father. I know that at present I am dependent upon you, but in the future——'

'The estate does not yield sevenfold, but certainly I never counted upon your marrying a mine of wealth, Percival, but as it is——'

'It will be useful?' said Percival, smiling. 'However, in these days women can

have control over their money, so we need not be accused of base desires.'

'The deuce they have,' muttered Lord Stretton, remembering many scenes between himself and his wife on this very subject.

'Sara Beddoes has not one sordid idea in her nature.'

'Humph! Well, I only know that my ideas of happiness would not centre round a marriage with an heiress. But if this girl is willing, I suppose that there is nothing——'

'Even Clara can't find a fault with her, I'm sure of that,' said Percival, smiling. 'She is not a regular beauty, but as near one as possible. She is tall, she has a splendid figure, and auburn hair, but it is the expression of her face that beats everything. I am sure that you will love her for her own sake.'

Lord Stretton rose and walked up and down the room for a few minutes. He seemed plunged in deep thought, and Percival, wondering, waited patiently.

‘What do you want me to do, Percival?’

‘I should like you to go and see Mrs. Beddoes and sound her. She may think me too poor.’

‘But you two seem to have settled it all. Is there any necessity that I should see her mother?’

Percival gazed at his father with a look of surprise; then he remembered that as they were all in deep mourning his father would naturally object to its being known that he was negotiating a marriage for his only son.

‘No one need know, sir; I shall tell Sara that——’

‘You would rather I went to see her mother.’

‘Certainly, it would be better; you see, Mrs. Beddoes might misinterpret your non-appearance.’

Lord Stretton again answered nothing for a few moments, then he said,

‘I wonder if she would?’

‘You could say that owing to our deep mourning, nothing must be made public for some time.’

‘Yes, of course. Still I wish your choice had fallen on any other girl.’

‘Because of the gold-mine?’

Lord Stretton sat down in the great leathern arm-chair, and this time there was a smile upon his face.

‘Well, yes—I’ll go.’

‘Of course I can’t go into society now, but——’

‘Oh! an engagement blots out many rules.’

‘But it will be a secret, sir.’

‘From Clara?’

‘ You must judge of that. Clara might be hurt.’

‘ In any case I fear she will be. Poor Clara.’

‘ Wish me joy, father,’ said Percival, after a moment’s pause.

‘ Joy! joy!—of course I do, Percival—Forgive me for the omission. In connection with marriage I have never known the meaning of the word, so I—I forgot it existed.’

At this moment Percival suddenly remembered his position, he remembered his mother’s command.

‘ I wish I could marry at once. There would then be less chance of his ever seeing that woman,’ he thought. ‘ A daughter-in-law would make the place cheerful for him. Poor father.’

‘ You have had your children,’ he said, in a low voice.

‘ Yes—you, Percival, have always been a bright spot in my life. Clara is more like her mother.’

‘ Sara will make you forget sadness. She has the best kind of high spirits.’

‘ She is perfect, eh ! Percival ?’

CHAPTER XII.

A REFUSAL.

SARA had not been born with a complex character, neither had the events of her life developed one for her. She possessed a nature at once so open and so bright that she never, of her own accord, perceived the dark side of any question. Why should she? She had till now woven dreams of happiness with as much ease as a spider spins a web. The happy, if somewhat lonely, family life at Chapel Stacey had contributed to keep her mind and her ideas pure of modern fallacies

and of modern doubts, and her strong affection for her fellow-creatures had helped to make her own life beautiful. She had not looked much below the surface, because the surface had amply sufficed her.

But this morning, when she woke up, her first thought was that there was a little cloud marring the sunshine of her life. Suddenly yesterday's events flashed into her mind, and she did not know whether to be most happy concerning Percival's love, or most unhappy with regard to her mother's strange words. Hopefulness carried the day, however; she loved and was loved. Her mother had only seen the dark side of things, because her married life had not been happy.

For all these reasons it was the same happy Sara, though one slightly more

thoughtful, who appeared in the breakfast-room. On the table lay her first love-letter, and her mother, who was making tea, cast a glance at it as she saw Sara's cheeks flush crimson, and Sara's fingers tremble a little as she opened it.

It was a very short and a very loving note, and Sara's mind threw off the last shade of doubt.

'Mother, it's all right! Percival could not write like that if his father objected.'

'Has he asked him?'

'He was only waiting for an opportunity; he was going to beg him to call on you.'

'I would advise you, Sara, to put the subject away till Lord Stretton *has* called. Mr. Greenwood is coming to luncheon.'

'Why should he? Of course, mother, it is just as you like, indeed it is difficult

to be agreeable when one's mind is dreadfully preoccupied. Anyhow, I will go out shopping with Guardian this morning. Every day he has new and delightful ideas about the requirements of ladies.'

'I wish he would return to his goldmine. It is very inconvenient having him always on our hands.' Lucy's voice for the first time had a little impatient ring in it.

'I like him so much,' answered Sara, laughing. 'Oh! here is a letter from Virginia, she says she cannot afford to come and see us. I am afraid uncle is worried about the land. Oh! mother, let's go and spend some time with them—in July, when all the hills are delicious. How strange it is to be free to come and go. I think that Chapel Stacey is the place I love most on earth.'

‘I have never been there since I left it. But now, yes, I should like to see it again,’ said Mrs. Beddoes, meditatively.

‘Why now more than last year, mother? Do you remember how much Aunt Lil begged you to come, but you never would?’

‘No, I never would.’

When her guardian came Sara was ready equipped. She felt unable to sit still till all was really settled.

‘Where shall we go, Miss Sara?’ said Jethro Cobbin, looking with admiration at his ward. ‘Is it an appointment to-day?’

‘Oh, let’s go anywhere you like, Guardian. I have no appointment.’

‘Not with Mr. Osborne?’ and Jethro seemed to be quite disappointed.

‘It is no use hiding it from you. You

know—well, mother says that Lord Stretton won't hear of it, but I don't think that it can be true.'

'Lord Stretton won't hear of it! I'm beggared! And why not?'

'Why not? That's what I say. We care about each other, and I am not deaf, or blind, or lame.'

'You're first-class, Miss Sara. You'll be first-class rich, too.'

'The Osbornes are a very old family, but my father was nobody in particular. I think his father was a county doctor, but the Gwillians have lived years and years on their own land. Still, Percival won't care about all that. He wouldn't mind if I were a sweep's daughter.'

'He's the right sort, his heart's where it should be, Miss Sara.'

The bright smile Sara gave him was like sunshine to Jethro.

‘That’s just what I think, Guardian. We don’t know much of each other, but the first moment I saw him I liked him, and it was the same with him. It does seem foolish to think one can love at first sight, but so it was. I know I could help him. He must work hard and get into Parliament and become famous. He likes me to know things, and oh! Guardian, he likes you. You shall come and live with us, and we’ll do something nice with all the money. Build a hospital or something useful. I know what it is to want money, so I can help people.’

‘If you don’t mind we’ll go and see a labour home this morning,’ said Cobbin. ‘I want to see how they carry on those things here. There are too many people in the world, that’s the truth, and yet over there we often couldn’t get men for the diggings, no, not for love or money.’

‘ We’ll have a labour home, then, and any man who begs shall be given work. I shall like doing that. I wish I were of age,’ and Sara, ignorant of the difficulties of doing good, saw the whole world reformed by the help of her gold-mine.

This morning, therefore, she enjoyed going over the labour home in Whitechapel Road. She spoke to those who were making ropes, and chattered to a poor semblance of a man who was splitting wood. She was like a ray of sunshine among them, but Jethro’s questions were more practical, and Sara’s views about labour and capital were certainly widened that morning. All the while, however, there was an underlying thought in her mind:

‘ Has Lord Stretton called on mother?’

Sara’s impatience was, nevertheless, as water unto wine when compared with that

of her mother. That morning Mrs. Beddoes also woke up with the mental question, 'Will he come?' When she saw Percival's note her lips were for a moment compressed, then the colour also flushed her face as she said to herself, 'He will come.' When Sara went out Lucy breathed more freely. She ordered luncheon with great care. Mr. Greenwood was coming to luncheon, and she knew that he was an epicure. Through this power of observation she seemed born for society, which likes to be studied; but Lucy, having mixed but little in the *beau monde*, by instinct took it quite naturally.

At eleven o'clock Lucy Beddoes went upstairs to change her morning-gown for one of soft, rich silk. The delicate tulle round the throat added, she knew, a touch of softness very captivating to the outward eye of man. Then from the depth of a

humble jewel-box she drew forth a little brooch, in the centre of which was an opal set round about with small diamonds. The trinket was very pretty, and possessed some value, but when most in need of money Lucy had never sold it. She now fastened it near her throat, and then she again went downstairs to work at the stole.

Quiet as she looked outwardly, her heart was beating very fast. She was mentally reviewing the past, and many conflicting and strange thoughts were surging in the ocean of her mind. Now and then from the depth of this emotion a smile parted her lips, but this smile referred to the present, not to the past.

‘It is my turn now,’ she thought, ‘my turn, and why should I have pity? I have none for them and none for him, none.’

She said this last word softly aloud as she edged the red cross with a thread of gold. Her stole was becoming a thing of beauty. She had nearly finished bordering her pattern when the door bell rang. Lucy glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to twelve, and she had ordered luncheon at two o'clock. She breathed a soft sigh of relief,

‘I have time,’ she said, ‘ample time, but Sara may come in.’

Lumb opened the door and announced ‘Lord Stretton.’

Under the brightest auspices it is impossible to meet a friend whom we have not seen nor written to for many years without a feeling of trepidation. But if it so happens that the whole tenor of our life has been changed through the action of that person, then the meeting must of necessity be extremely interesting

from a psychological point of view, and will lead to strange recollections on both sides. For these two, Lord Stretton and Lucy Beddoes, this meeting was intensely strange and bewildering.

The tall, well-made, handsome man, whom it was impossible to mistake for anything but an English gentleman, and whom a stranger would at once mentally have placed among the English aristocracy, stopped short after he had taken a few steps into the room. Lumb quickly closed the door, and the two were left alone before a word was spoken. Lucy had at once risen from her embroidery, but she had stooped to secure her needle before she very slightly pushed back her chair and rose to meet her visitor. That pause, slight as it was, had brought a bright colour into the widow's face, adding new beauty to its calm attractiveness.

Her intense excitement was forcibly stilled, but it was at the cost of a supreme and painful effort. She could not have risen a moment before she did, for her limbs trembled beneath her. During Lord Stretton's pause, however, she regained control over herself, and very slowly she took a step towards him. On his side he found himself constrained to break the silence, for was not he the intruder? This woman, and, as he saw at a glance, this beautiful woman, beautiful because every movement was perfect and every curve pleasing, had never written to invite him to come, she had never spoken to him since . . . The past also flooded his memory, and he felt humbled before her. It had been his mother's doing, he had been worked upon to give her up. The family pride, the family poverty had all been urged upon him, and he had basely given in. He had

forsaken the woman he loved and the woman who loved him, and he had married an heiress. Never a word had Lucy spoken to him since, never a line had she sent him; but he asked himself, had she ever known how fully she had been avenged? Lord Stretton could not answer this question. He would, at this moment, have given much to know the answer, but this was impossible. He was the culprit, and he had come to plead for himself; that is, if she would allow him to do so. Without the excuse of Percival's love-story he would never have come, and now a strong wish took hold of him to tell her that the blame was not all his, but would she listen? The past could not be recalled. Most likely she hated and despised him, whilst on his side, and for his own punishment, he had always loved her memory. Indeed, looking at her now, still so young and so

beautiful, he felt that he still loved her. It was true that her image had with time become slightly blurred, now all the old love seemed to reawaken ; most likely she would never let him tell her that though it was too late to blot out the sins of his youth, yet her forgiveness would still be very sweet to him. She was a pure, beautiful goddess, he a very erring man, a man who, having forsaken the woman he had loved, had never had enough courage or power over himself to make the woman he had married happy. Worse, in moments when he had been driven to desperation by his wife's violent temper, he had cruelly proclaimed his indifference.

A man seldom likes to own that he has failed without benefit of doubt or possibility of sympathy, and Lord Stretton was not an exception, but he had so much that was good and so much that was noble in his

nature that it was no part of his programme to exonerate himself to Lucy.

He had come there meaning to behave in a formal, business-like manner, but suddenly he found himself in the presence of a woman whose attractive power was as great, if not greater, than in the first blush of her youth.

‘I did not send up my name,’ said Lord Stretton, making the plunge in a low tone and without further preface, ‘because I thought that perhaps you might not receive me, and it is really necessary that I should see you about my son Percival’s affairs.’

Lucy did not hold out her hand, but she half motioned her visitor to a chair facing the light, whilst she herself sank quietly upon a low settee, with her back to the window. She wanted to see every feature of his face. She had thought so often of this moment, she had longed for it—only

as some natures can long for what seems impossible ; and now that her wish was realized, she felt as if she must not forget her true object. Lord Stretton had changed more than she had, this was her first thought ; his hair was well sprinkled with grey, his eyes were bordered by several crows'-feet, and his forehead was no longer smooth ; but in spite of all this he was the same man she had loved with the wild passionate love of unrestrained youth.

‘ About your son ? ’ she said, in a soft low tone.

‘ Yes, about my son, my only son, you know. He has—it is very strange, considering it was far from our minds—he has fallen in love with your daughter.’

As he spoke he hardly thought of his words ; he too was gazing at the past, as viewed in the present exquisite outline of Lucy Beddoes.

‘ Yes, I know.’

‘ I promised Percival to come and see you. He is a good fellow. I think you might trust any woman’s happiness with him.’

Lucy laughed softly.

‘ That is a great deal to promise for a man,’ she said ; and Lord Stretton winced, for all his fears returned to him.

‘ Yes, I know it is, but Percival is—not like—his father.’

‘ Is he like his mother?’ she asked, gently ; but the irony of her tone could not be hidden.

Lord Stretton was silent. Terrible as his mistake had been, especially in its results, his nature was too noble to speak one word, or even to utter an assent, against the dead. What he had suffered was at present hidden from outsiders, but on the other hand he was too just to

blame Lucy for her tone of bitterness. She too had suffered. The silence was painful, and again Lucy forced him to break it.

‘We must forget the past, we must put it away from us.’

Lucy looked up slowly. It was the look that had captivated her lovers, and Lord Stretton was more easily influenced than they were, for he had never really ceased to care for her.

‘It is easy for you to say that,’ she said, dreamily, as if she were awaking from a dream.

‘Why easy for me?’

‘You have had many interests. Your children too have filled up your thoughts.’

‘And your daughter has——’

‘I have seen very little of Sara.’

‘Well, but now we must help the young people to be happy.’

‘ I cannot help them.’

‘ You cannot?’

Lord Stretton rose and moved a few steps nearer to Lucy. The strange attractive power, very strongly developed in some women, and which Lucy possessed to an extraordinary degree, made him feel inclined to forget his mission and to think only of her, but outwardly Lucy did not move at all. Her taper fingers were loosely clasped, her long, black skirt lay in soft folds upon the carpet, and Lord Stretton was conscious that it was close to him, even touching his foot. Then recollecting himself he moved away and leant against the chimney-piece. He had come for Percival’s sake, not for his own.

Lucy spoke in the same low tones.

‘ No, Sara has another lover, one in every way suitable. She is not of the

same rank as your son, her father's connections are not even as good as were the Gwillians.'

Lord Stretton scattered conventionality to the winds as he answered,

'Won't you forget the past, Lucy, at all events for your child's sake?' He said this bending forward a little.

'I am only recalling a fact to your mind, Lord Stretton.'

'My son knows nothing, absolutely nothing of the past. He fell in love with your child at a public ball. I knew nothing about it. It was love at first sight. He says she returns it. Birth has nothing to do with such decided inclination. If she had not a penny I should still be here pleading for him. Lucy—for your child's sake forget the past.'

Lucy rose too, now. She felt less strong of purpose, for Lord Stretton's

tone was full of tenderness. He had twice called her by her name. The sound thrilled through her as of old. She remembered how passionately she had loved him years ago. It was the remembrance that melted her, but not the feeling itself, she said.

‘ You are very kind, Lord Stretton, to come here, and you have done it for the sake of your son. You want me to accept your decision for love of my daughter. I can only tell you that that argument has no weight with me.’

‘ No weight with you ?’

‘ Rather because she is my daughter she shall never be exposed to——’

‘ Lucy !’

He suddenly took her hands in his and stooped forward. The old love, tenfold in strength, had returned, but she quickly drew away her hands.

‘Then you will never forgive me, never soften?’ he asked, in a tone of bitter disappointment.

‘I have no feeling of forgiveness—or otherwise,’ she said, indifferently.

‘But what am I to do? What shall I say to Percival? You must not carry this too far. He is very much in earnest.’

‘Sara is not of age—say that there can be no engagement.’

‘They are not to see each other?’

‘It would be wiser, better for them; but, of course, I may be unable to prevent it.’

‘You would not do so?’

‘But *you must*. It would be only cruel to your son.’

‘Lucy, what does this mean? What are you driving at? Do you utterly refuse?’

‘There is no need to be definite.’

There was a ring at the door, and Lucy stepped back to the settee. Lord Stretton felt he must go. He could not trust himself further.

‘ I must come again ; when may I ? Do nothing hastily I entreat you,’ he said, hurriedly.

‘ I have never acted hastily,’ she answered ; and, as Lumb opened the door, Lord Stretton escaped.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WAITING TIME.

THERE was no time and no opportunity to ask questions, for when Sara returned, Mr. Greenwood was in the drawing-room, making himself extremely agreeable to her mother. He had come fully equipped for his campaign. He must win Sara and Sara's money. He could hardly believe his good fortune, but all the same his surprise should not paralyze action. Young ladies in these days were not quite so easy to lead and to win as they had been in former times, when an innocent country

miss with money was the reward of the noblest and most daring man of fashion. Modern times were far less simple, and modern women far more difficult to tackle. The fashionable *roué* was entirely out of fashion, that gaudy fly would catch no fish. Now your *rôle* must be to be witty, courteous, clever, and if all else failed, philanthropy usually won the country heiress. Sara was certainly unsophisticated, but she was so natural, and so much alive, that she had no special vanity which could be touched by flattery. However, the more difficult the task, the more meritorious its accomplishment. Gaythorne Greenwood had a clear, delicious mental vision of the society paragraphs announcing that 'the well-known Mr. Gaythorne Greenwood was about to marry the heiress of the gold-mine, a lady as charming as she was rich.'

Sara was not very lively during lunch-time, but she was a good listener, and when Mr. Greenwood chose to be entertaining, no lips could resist the charm of his talk, they were bound to expand in smiles.

‘Miss Beddoes, do you know your last society name?’ he said, bending down towards her with a smile that would have captivated a girl not already in love.

‘Why should I have one given to me?’

‘A nick-name is a mark of favour. You are Una and the Lion. Mr. Coppin is——’

‘Cobbin, please. Guardian’s name just suits him.’

‘I beg his pardon, of course Cobbin; some day a *savant* will make him into a myth of the sun. The gold-mine will fit in well with that theory.’

‘Lion and the golden mane. What shall I be?’

‘First Una. Then the one who follows the sun. Then Belphebe, goddess of heaven. Then the moon pure and simple. By the way, have you heard that Lady Violet Craven went to a fancy ball in silver gauze as the moon? The poet, Courthouse—the minor poet, you know—went home and wrote a poem on her. In it he longed to be the mist that wrapped the lady round, and all that sort of thing. It was really rather pretty; but some spiteful critic has found out that the sentiment is borrowed from a modern Provençal poet.’

‘Are there troubadours now?’ asked Lucy.

‘Certainly, they call themselves Félibres. I don’t know the meaning of the word, I believe they don’t know it themselves;

but they sing—prepared—impromptu songs and win prizes.’

‘I wish there was now more poetry in life,’ said Mrs. Beddoes, softly.

Her face was still flushed, and she looked far more poetical than Sara, who was radiant with health.

‘Shall I start the Félibres Society in town, Mrs. Beddoes? Command, and I shall obey. You must not mind a nightly serenade, and you and Miss Sara must award the prizes. A laurel wreath will do, first washed if picked in town. You would get a whole world of abuse upon you, more fierce even than that showered on ladies who do good work. The ninety-nine unchosen minor poets would make your lives unendurable.’

‘I fear that England and English girls are too matter-of-fact,’ said Sara.

‘That is the danger. My friend, the

Duchess of Lonewater, told me the other day that she always avoided everything written in short lines, alias poetry.'

Lucy smiled.

'What did you answer, Mr. Greenwood, for reports says you favour the poets?'

'I said she was more than right, for no one could wish to cut short anything she said; as to poetry, I buy all the first editions, but I never read them. I find the poets themselves buy back the first copies at startling prices.'

Lucy laughed. Mr. Greenwood made her forget serious matters. Certainly Sara's mind must be influenced in his favour. If her daughter married him the world would only applaud her mother, and even the most select circles of society would be open to her. The glory would be reflected brightly upon Lucy Beddoes.

Sara never guessed that day, as Mr. Greenwood accompanied them, that the tongue of society was already saying he was her chosen suitor, and for once nobody complained. Such a brilliant society man was sure to marry well, and the country girl was very fortunate to have been selected by a man 'who could have had anybody.'

It was only late that evening that Sara herself could ask the question she longed to have answered.

Her mother was tired, and as Sara entered her room she reclined in an arm-chair and half-closed her eyes.

'Mother, you said he came. I am longing to know. It is all right, isn't it? I thought Percival would have called, but——'

'He did call, but you were dressing for the ball, and I told Lumb to say you were engaged.'

Sara stood still, and her face turned as white as her white dress.

‘ Mother !’

‘ It is as I told you. Lord Stretton can decide nothing. In fact, you must expect no encouragement from him. I am too proud to let my daughter engage herself under such conditions, so I have decided that all must be at an end.’

‘ At an end between me and Percival? It can’t be, mother, we love each other.’

The blood rushed back to her cheeks, and she suddenly sat down.

‘ You are very young, Sara ;—as if love made everything else easy! When I was young I loved too, more than perhaps you can understand, but I had to give up the man I loved.’

Sara knew no particulars of that past history. The mystery impressed her, and

made a new pity flow into her young heart.

‘Then, mother, you can understand, you know what it is like; but I don’t really believe this. What a horrid man Lord Stretton must be! I—I hate him.’

‘No, he is only weak. He thinks of the conventionalities.’

‘But what is the matter with me? It isn’t even that horrid money that is wanting.’

‘I am tired, Sara, you must go to bed. Good-night, dear, and if you take my advice you will not knock your head against a stone wall. It is kinder to be perfectly open with you.’

That night Sara could not sleep. She pondered over the question, she turned it all ways, backwards and forwards. The thing had appeared so simple before-hand.

Percival was as regardless of conventionalities as she was. They loved, and no human obstacle seemed to be in the way—and yet all at once there had been placed some strong invisible wall between them. Sara was not wanting in direct courage. She settled that she would and that she must see Percival, and that all would be made clear. She rose early, wrote a few words to him, and appointed a meeting-place at Kensington Museum, where she said she would take her guardian. They would find some place there to talk it out. She sent the note down to Lumb with a message to have it posted at once, and then went down to breakfast.

As she opened the door, she saw her mother bending over a basket of beautiful flowers, and Sara thought:

‘How beautiful she looks! She is still so young, she ought to be happier, but she

does look happier since we have lived together.'

'What lovely flowers! Where do they come from?' exclaimed Sara.

'The sender's name is not on them, most likely they are meant for you.'

'For me!' Sara gave a start of pleasure, then she added: 'Oh, no, look! the direction is quite plain, they are for you, mother,' and Sara smiled: 'I don't wonder that people send you flowers! You are so much prettier, and you look younger than your daughter.'

'If I could have had your good fortune in my youth!' said Lucy, picking out a beautiful rose and fastening it in the bosom of her dress.

There was a tone of intense bitterness in her voice, and for the first time Sara noticed it. It made her shiver a little.

'Good fortune! Somehow I don't think

it will be good to me. If it is of no use for——’ She stopped short. ‘I wonder if money is of any use for happiness?’

‘I am sure that it is. It will certainly help you, Sara, in finding a happy home. I know already of one man who has no capricious father at his back, and who is devoted to you.’

Sara blushed. A girl is never quite insensible to such words.

‘Devoted to me!’ she said, laughing. ‘Well, I am sorry for it.’

‘Sorry! You ought to be very glad.’

‘How can I when—— Do you mean Mr. Greenwood?’

‘Yes. He is always here; as I told you, he comes simply for your sake.’

‘Then please tell him not to come, because you know, mother, that I can only love one man, and that is Percival Osborne.’

‘What nonsense, Sara! You ought to have more pride. If Lord Stretton puts his foot down upon it, and he certainly will do so, you can never marry his son.’

Sara was silent. Something in her mother’s tone jarred upon her. She appeared unable to understand her, and then suddenly her heart longed for the home at Chapel Stacey, and for the kind faces of her aunt, of Virginia and of Herringham. She was beginning to feel lonely in this big world which had showered down its good things upon her.

Later on, when her guardian arrived to fetch her, her spirits revived a little.

‘Shall we walk, Miss Sara?’

‘No, let’s take a hansom. I want to get there quickly, please.’

‘Where is there?’

‘Why, to Kensington Museum. You don’t know it, no more do I much.’

‘Is it an opportunity?’ said Cobbin, smiling, though he noted Sara’s grave looks.

‘Yes,’ she answered, laughing, ‘it is, you are right; but oh, Guardian, do you know that your face is quite cheering to me. I’m so glad you’re not a lord.’

‘A lord! I’m beggared!’

The two laughed like children, then Sara’s bright face was again clouded over.

‘It may not be a laughing matter. Lord Stretton won’t hear of it.’

‘Won’t hear of you? Why, he couldn’t better your fortune.’

‘He doesn’t think so. Guardian, I’m so miserable.’

Jethro rubbed his hands together. Here was a puzzle indeed; he fancied money could do everything but keep the dying alive.

‘But you’ll see Mr. Osborne to-day?’

‘It’s an appointment. Mother would be horrified if she knew it, but I couldn’t help it. Were you ever in love, Guardian?’

‘No, not exactly,’ said Jethro. ‘I’m not a lady’s man. Till I saw you, Miss Sara, I had a middling idea of the sex, but now—— Come, Miss Sara, don’t look so down; I’ll go to this lord myself, and see if he won’t hear reason. To refuse a goldmine isn’t common sense, but over in our parts young women don’t wait for their father’s consent, though it’s honester to say that many of them haven’t got a parent near handy.’

Sara actually felt shy when she walked towards the meeting-place. For one moment she thought Percival had not kept the appointment, but the next instant she was reassured. He came hastily towards her, but one look at his face told Sara that her mother had not invented the bad news.

Mr. Cobbin had already moved away to study some casts of the antique, though at present his art education had to be carried on without much help from Sara. When they had met, the lovers' hands were slow to part again. They were silent for a few moments, feeling too surely that speech would be disappointing enough when it came.

‘Tell me, Percival, is it true?’

‘I can't understand it. It is bewildering. When I first spoke of you, he raised no objection except such as might reasonably come from your people; but yesterday evening he went over it again with me, and he says that there must be no engagement.’

‘But why?’ persisted Sara, raising her head proudly.

‘That is what puzzles me. I only know that he won't hear of it.’

‘ We can write to each other.’

‘ My father says that your mother would not allow that. You are not of age, and that if it is not allowed there must be no correspondence and no meeting. Darling, the blow has been dreadful. I gave up Oxford for my father’s sake, and now this—this seems too hard, too unjust.’

‘ You must leave him, you must find a profession, something to do, so as not to be dependent upon him,’ said Sara proudly. ‘ Why should we give in to anything so foolish? Besides, when I come of age I need ask no one. Guardian is for us. Is it because I’m not good enough for you, Percival?’

‘ You are far, far too good for me, darling, but what can we do? If it were not for—several things I should not hesitate, but I am his only son and he has but me. Clara and he have never got on

well together. I cannot leave him. No, we must wait patiently, and perhaps time——’

Sara was young, and youth is proud and headstrong.

‘Then you don’t much mind. Why did you ever let me care?’

‘I don’t mind? My dearest, what are you saying?’

‘If only I knew—but it all seems so silly, so foolish. If you cared you would try and find work.’

‘Won’t you trust me, sweetest?’

Sara’s good sense returned.

‘Oh, of course I will. Percival, forgive me; I don’t know why, but this week I feel as if something strange were happening to me. Oh, I am beginning to hate these balls and parties where I can never meet you.’

‘My father talks of going abroad almost immediately.’

‘Then let us go too. Perhaps we could meet. I seem to feel so lonely.’

‘Your mother will help you.’

‘Yes, yes, of course she will, but she didn’t do so yesterday, she seems so certain that Lord Stretton won’t hear of it. She only advises our giving each other up—nothing else. It is cruel.’

‘What nonsense! We have not waited long yet,’ and he smiled.

Then Sara laughed, and the hope of youth returned. They joined Jethro Cobbin, and, in spite of the cloud, they managed to be happy for a short while.

‘I mustn’t come again without telling mother,’ said Sara. ‘My conscience feels a little stinging, but still we do understand each other, don’t we?’

‘Perfectly, darling. You will trust me, we must trust each other, and wait patiently for this year at least.’

‘Nearly a whole year, without writing and without seeing you!’

‘Then we need not be ashamed of coming back to the attack. It will be harder for me if you won’t agree to this; I can’t explain, but——’

‘It will be much harder for me! You will go abroad, you will have change of scene, and see other girls, and——’

Lovers talk in much the same language all over the world; and these two knew so little of life, of the world, even of themselves. There is, however, a strong instinct in youth, and this instinct caused Sara’s eyes to fill with tears when at last she said good-bye to her lover; these tears made Percival ask himself again:

‘Why is this? There is some mystery about it which I cannot understand. Oh, why did I promise mother not to leave home! How could she ask me?’

As he pondered over all these things he never even faintly guessed that, through him, the woman he was bound to keep out of his father's house had placed her foot on the first step of the Stacey stairs.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RETURN.

LUCY BEDDOES knew very well from whom the flowers came; indeed, the next day, expecting the sender of them, she dressed herself in her most becoming attire, though she hid his flowers in the dining-room.

This time Lucy rose immediately to receive her guest, and she even held out her hand to him. Some feeling which he could not explain made Lord Stretton pause before taking it, and the idea flashed through his brain, 'What am I doing?' The next moment prudence was cast behind him.

Something about this woman, some secret, powerful attraction which he had no means of weighing in the balance, overcame him. Moreover, it appealed to all that was best in his nature. It appeared to his simple nature as if the time had come to right a wrong, and that, if this beautiful and womanly woman could ever forgive him, then it was his duty to ask for her forgiveness.

He was a man of the world in the best sense of this phrase. He had seen many beautiful women, but none had influenced him as this old love of his was able to do it, at once and powerfully. It is the noblest natures alone who come back to their first loves.

‘I was obliged to come,’ he said, as if in apology for his early visit. ‘I wanted to come, in order to plead once more for the young people.’

‘Was that all you came for?’

She sat down and smiled, lifting her eyes to Lord Stretton's kind, handsome face in her slow and half-provoking manner.

'No, you know that it is not all I came for. I wanted to see you. I fancied the past was buried, and now I find that it is risen from the dead.'

'The past had better remain buried,' she said, carelessly; 'but about Sara——'

'Percival is naturally dreadfully distressed about your decision. He cannot understand my attitude, and how can I explain it to him?'

'You want some one to take the responsibility from you,' she said, softly but scornfully; and the words, with their double meaning, stung him sharply.

'No, it is not that; but, honestly, where is the sense of stopping their romance?'

'Sense! There never is any sense in

such things, but the will of another has to serve for common-sense.'

'I know what you mean. Lucy, you have no pity. Are you thinking only of yourself?'

'I suppose I am—but I do not wish to influence you. You can go and approve of your son's choice, then I shall manage Sara alone.'

'Lucy—tell me your reason, your true reason. Is it one that time will alter? Would you think otherwise if I were to speak out to you and tell you——'

Lucy's foot softly tapped the ground. Her face flushed, her hands trembled a little.

'Whatever you do or say, Lord Stretton, will make no difference to me. Sara shall never, with my consent, marry your son.'

'It is senseless. Even the world would

say so. She will be rich, and Percival will not object to money. Land is very unprofitable, and I must think of Clara. Indeed—Lucy,—He came close beside her, and took her passive hand in his as he sighed. At this moment the rush of recollection overpowered him—‘Lucy, forgive me; if you have suffered, I also have suffered.’

‘Was it my fault?’ she said, calmly.

‘No, it was not your fault, it was mine and my mother’s. I was a devoted son. She would not hear of our love. But don’t you see that you are repeating her mistake?’

‘Excuse me. I have no sordid motives. If Sara were penniless, I should say the same. My daughter shall never marry the son of the woman who took my place.’

‘My son.’

Lucy laughed coldly, and Lord Stretton

dropped her hand. How hard she was. Good God! was this his Lucy, his old love? What had changed her? The answer was easy enough. *He had done it*, and this feeling gave once more a tone of tenderness to his voice.

‘Lucy—listen—I have come back to you——’

‘I never asked you to do so,’ she said, proudly.

‘No, I have not said so, but this fate, this chance gave me the excuse. I have come back because to be near you seems to be like rest in heaven. I don’t expect you to forgive the past, but at least when I leave you I shall know that—that I came and asked for your forgiveness.’

There was a pause. Lucy was weighing his words. Was that all he wanted of her, forgiveness, the one thing she could not give him?

‘You came to ask a favour for your son.’

‘I should have come anyhow. If not now, some day, Lucy. I don’t know why such things should be, why some love is undying, but so it is. Mine is like that.’

‘I don’t agree with you. I think love can be killed. Mine was.’

If she had now shown signs of giving in, perhaps Lord Stretton might have seen deeper, and he might have paused. It was this perfect command of herself which provoked him to go further.

‘I want to teach you otherwise. I want to—to—but even you see, Lucy, how this is hardly the time for me to come to you.’

‘It was your own doing. I have given my answer. It is better for you to put your foot down at once upon your son’s

choice. It will be happier for both of them.'

'Do you positively mean this?'

'Entirely.'

'But, Lucy, if I cannot agree?'

'Very well. We need not meet again.'

'What nonsense!'

He took her hand again. How long it was since he had thought of a woman's hand as something divinely fair. Had he dared he would have kissed it, but her eyes were still hidden, and he could not guess how she would take it.

His strong grasp thrilled through Lucy. But for the past history she would have given in, she would have laid her head on his shoulder, and she would have felt, 'At last, at last, here is rest;' but revenge had too long been her daily companion. It was too true, long cherished thoughts of revenge had killed her highest love.

Now love was merely a means to an end, not the end itself. She thought, 'He has come back to me now—only now.'

She did not answer his exclamation.

'Lucy, speak, dearest. Tell me what to do?'

'I have told you.'

'This is maddening. You see how I am placed. How can I face Percival and give him no good reason for this caprice?'

'Did you ever give me a good reason?—Invent one.'

He rose impatiently.

'I cannot, I cannot. I put him off yesterday as best I could, but—I know him. He is the best son a man ever had, he thinks of me before himself—I can't behave so to him. I shall kill his respect. Besides, it will be only a question of time. Percival will be true to the woman he loves.'

‘Ah! Then he will be unlike—’ She stopped short, and stood up too. The soft perfume of her clothes, of her hair, the soft but strong magnetic power conquered him. Age does not always give a man greater strength to resist a woman’s power; on the contrary, it often diminishes it. Lord Stretton saw plainly that this one, this beautiful woman full of the mature charm, full of terrible strength, was not to be thwarted. The temptation lay in this one act, but he only dimly perceived it, for a man always believes that circumstance will somehow work for his good, and that a way of escape is always to be found from the result of his own actions.

‘Look, dearest, tell me, do you mean that this must not be?’

‘Yes.’ She looked up at him with all the sweet softness he had treasured in his

recollection through all the years of his wretched married life. He had had so little love, his power—a good man's power of loving—had been so little exhausted that he was still craving for it, and here it was, if—if—After all, he alone could not ensure Percival's happiness. If Lucy stood firm she could find some way of preventing her daughter's marriage; why, therefore, must he ruin his own happiness by holding out? He had done his best to crush her objections, what more could he do? He put one arm round her and drew her gently to him till Lucy's fair head rested on his shoulder. For one moment, all the past was forgotten, all was swept away, the man and the woman were in heaven—but only for one moment. Then the great tide that had years ago encroached on Lucy's fair domain rolled

back, and the sad moaning of discontent was again audible to her.

‘Douglas,’ she said, very, very softly.

‘Douglas, do you love me at last?’

‘You know it, dearest.’

‘Nothing shall come between us again, nothing; say it, Douglas. Oh, the years have been so long, so very long.’

There was a little sob heard, the arm that supported her felt the strength of the long-drawn breath.

‘Nothing, my darling, nothing.’

‘Not even your—not even Percival?’

‘Nothing, sweetest.’

She gently released herself, for she had not learnt self-control in vain.

‘You must go. This will never do;’ then she smiled through her tears.

‘Why not? Why should we be ashamed of our love?’

He threw all considerations to the wind, he was completely intoxicated with this new-old love. It was as strange and as wonderful to him as if he had been a young man of twenty. She, on the contrary, had quickly recovered her self-possession, only a new, strange brilliancy shone in her eyes, and her lips were tremulous.

‘Oh, you know there are many things to think of. People will talk if——no, no, everything must be as before. In some months’ time it will be different.’

‘As you like; yes, you are right; but when we can be open about it, all will be easier. Even if we have to wait because of our children——’

Lucy gave a little start.

‘To wait—why? What do you mean? Don’t spoil this one hour—don’t, please, Douglas.’

‘ Spoil it! I would not do so for the world, my sweet one. It shall be our secret, our precious secret. Lucy, there is so much to tell you, so much to talk over. Years won’t be enough——’

‘ Years! One cannot count on anything. Go now, please, I want to be alone, I want to think about it, to believe it if I can. Perhaps it is a dream, still only a dream.’

‘ Nonsense. When I can prove to you that it is a reality, a beautiful reality, then you will be too happy to doubt or to care whether Percival——’

‘ You promised, Douglas, that *that* should never be. I must have you all to myself, you must bury the past, you have so much to make up for.’

‘ Foolish darling!’

He stooped down and lifted the oval face

with his two strong, gentle hands, and looked into her eyes.

‘ Am I foolish ? Perhaps ; anyhow, you have pledged yourself.’

‘ To a sweet tyrant.’

‘ Yes, Douglas, to a sweet tyrant ; but go, go now, I want to be alone.’

CHAPTER XV.

NEUTRALITY.

CLARA OSBORNE had very few personal friends. During her mother's life-time she had lived for her, and had entirely devoted herself to her, so that now the time hung rather heavily on her hands. Her father's cheerful face made her more miserable than she was already. She was furious with him for feeling his loss so little, and angry too with Percival because he was preoccupied, and because he did not resent his father's cheerful spirits. A woman must have some outside resource, and if there is no

outlet for her affections she usually throws herself into society or into active good works. For Clara, society was out of the question, but good works remained; and one day Miss Osborne drove to St. Cecilia's Vicarage to offer her services to the rector. His name was the Reverend James Colborne, and he received his visitor with the easy courtesy—occasionally found combined—of a gentleman and a clergyman.

‘I have heard you wanted workers,’ she said. ‘I am in deep mourning for my mother, so I have a good deal of time on my hands.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, kindly. ‘You like the poor, I conclude, and you can sympathize with their trials, else you would not be here.’

‘Oh, I have been used to poor people. At Stacey I visited in the parish. My mother was very particular about the

people. If any of them did not behave well, they were turned out of the village.'

Mr. Colborne smiled.

'We can't do that here. We can only win their hearts.'

Clara's sad, discontented face did not strike him as specially attractive. On her side she looked at the simply furnished, uncomfortable room, and decided that Mr. Colborne was a bachelor.

'There are some things which only a woman can help them with,' she said.

Her eyes wandered to the chimney-piece, and she was suddenly attracted by the sight of a woman's photograph. The face was beautiful, and there was a sweet womanliness about the figure. Mr. Colborne saw the direction of Miss Osborne's eyes.

'Yes, indeed, a woman's influence is of untold benefit to them. I see you are

looking at that photograph. It is the picture of one whose very presence seemed to bring comfort to the poor and to the sick.'

'Indeed,' said Clara, rising to examine the portrait. 'It is certainly a charming face. I can't pretend to any attractive power, but I can deliver tracts and call for club money. In fact, I want something to do.'

'I am glad you say that at once. I will find you something to do, but you must not mind if the work is rather uninteresting.'

'You mean, I should not be the right person to bring consolation to cottagers—I should not influence people as this lady did?' she said, with a touch of pride in her voice.

'She was a saint, Miss Osborne, and they are rare.'

‘Very rare, I should think. Well, anyhow, for the next fortnight I can help in any way you like. After that I shall hope to persuade my father to go abroad.’

‘Ah, indeed.’ Then James Colborne fetched a list and appointed Clara’s work. She took up precious time, for help during a fortnight was almost useless to him, but he was too great a saint himself to tell her so, or to let her discover her uselessness. ‘A soul in sorrow,’ he thought to himself, as he looked at the girl’s habitual frown.

That evening Clara told Percival and her father what she had done.

‘We can go abroad soon, can’t we?’ she asked, turning to her father.

‘Abroad—well, no, I don’t think so; it is a great bother. I shall go home. There’s no place like home.’

Clara’s face clouded over.

‘Home! It won’t be home to me any more. No, no, let us go abroad.’

Lord Stretton looked radiant this evening. It was impossible not to notice his changed looks. Percival, who was feeling more than miserable, wondered why his father could be so little affected by his son’s unhappiness.

‘If you wish it, Clara, I think it would be a good thing for you to have a change. By all means find a companion and go abroad.’

‘Clara mustn’t go without us,’ said Percival, with a sudden wish to show his father that after all Clara’s wishes should be considered.

The subject dropped for the time being, and only in the evening was it mentioned again between father and son.

‘Why should not Clara get a little change, Percival? She mopes too much.’

‘Half her life has gone,’ said Percival, slowly.

‘Poor child, but some new joy will take away the old sorrow. Will you take her abroad, Percival? It will do you good too.—By the way, I want to tell you definitely that all that business about Miss Beddoes must be at an end.’

‘Must be? Surely, sir, that is impossible?’

‘I am afraid, my poor boy, that you must make up your mind as others before you have had to do. I had another talk with Mrs. Beddoes to-day, and it seems that she is quite immovable.’

‘I thought it was your objections, sir, that stood in the way?’

‘Well, we both object. She has her reasons and I have mine. The girl is under age, and must obey her mother, and in the meanwhile it is more honourable to

throw it all up. I don't say that when you are both your own masters, and if Miss Beddoes is still of the same mind, then that might be another question; but at this moment—— I'm very sorry, Percival, but once for all you must give her up.'

Percival stood quite still. He was silent from intense surprise. He could never have believed his father would have stood in his way without apparent reason or without sufficient cause. Had he been free, unfettered by that dreadful promise, he would at once have decided to leave his father, and to seek work of some kind or other. As it was, he could not do so. There was nothing for it but patience—but would Sara understand this strange conduct? He was placed in a very difficult position, and one that seemed to him almost unbearable.

‘Miss Beddoes will be extremely surprised at all this,’ he said at last. ‘She will think that she has been treated in a preposterous manner.’

‘Her mother will explain the position, I suppose. The girl is sure to get engaged very soon. In fact, her mother has already chosen the man she wishes her to marry.’

‘As if, in these days, girls were bought and sold in this way!’ said Percival. ‘I may as well say, once for all, father, that I shall marry no one else, and I feel sure that she will not.’

‘Let us hear no more about it. It is impossible. You have seen the girl barely half-a-dozen times. It is not as if this were a long-standing affection; in that case—’

Lord Stretton paused. He hated himself for giving pain to Percival, the son

who had always been a comfort to him, but the choice lay between siding with him—which would not advance his suit one step—or siding with Lucy—Lucy! At this moment the word was a powerful talisman. His was no half love, no new fancy. It was the old love flowing back with increased force, and why should he destroy his own hopes for the sake of Percival? How much he wished that Percival had never set eyes on Lucy's child, but this wish was so futile that it was hardly worth giving it a moment's thought. The complications were so strange, so intensely inconvenient, and unfortunately Lucy had foolishly made it a test question. But even Lucy did not know all. His own marriage would leave him a poor man, and Lucy had no money. He must tell her some day—not yet. The whole subject was

intensely irritating, but he had no choice—so he said. It was Lucy against Percival; and Lucy's victory, in spite of many misgivings, seemed certain. Only Lord Stretton felt that, after all, Percival could afford to wait and he could not. Things would come right for the younger man; whilst for him—for him—Lucy must forgive him, she must be his as soon as public opinion allowed it. Then all his past mistakes would be blotted out, all the old sores healed, and the old wrongs righted. He would once more respect himself, and the absence of this feeling had been no small part of his punishment.

‘I must write to her once more,’ said Percival, after a long silence.

‘Her mother will not hear of any sort of binding or of keeping up a correspondence.’

‘She need not be afraid of underhand ways. Sara is incapable of it. The mother, on the contrary, I distrust very much. There is some mystery under all this, and I shall not quietly submit to it.’

‘My dear fellow, you must not take this to heart so much. You are not the only man who has failed to win a first love.’

‘But there have been reasons, sufficient reasons. In my case there are none.’

‘Be sure that there are reasons in this case, sufficient reasons.’

‘Then why am I not told them?’

Lord Stretton turned away. He would not discuss the subject further. Percival did not know about his mother’s will; on the other hand, Lord Stretton had a cousin who would, he believed, leave him a modest fortune, but she was not even in frail

health, and he was not accustomed to wait for dead men's shoes.

'Take my advice ; start off with Clara to Switzerland or Italy, and let this blow over. I shall go home. I don't mind the solitude for a time.'

'Clara would like it, I know, but I can't leave you, sir.'

'For a month ! A month will do Clara all the good in the world, and she will come home with new ideas. Indeed, you must take her. I have plenty to do at Stacey.'

Percival retired to his room, but before he went to bed he wrote a long letter to Sara, telling her that nothing would move his father, and that her mother also forbade all intercourse.

'For the present, darling, I am bound to give in. I could not do anything dishon-

ourable. I could not put you in a false position, but be sure of one thing, that I will wait for you, wait always till you give me leave to come.'

On her side Lucy had undertaken the same kind offices for Sara. She too chose that evening to tell Sara definitely that all was at an end, that nothing would move Lord Stretton, and that they must give up all intercourse.

'But why?' said Sara, her face no longer bright and hopeful. 'Why, mother? I can't believe it. It seems senseless. We only ask to be allowed to write to each other.'

'No, certainly not. It is better that all should end. You must trust me, dear Sara, to do what I think best.'

'But Percival will never give in.'

'He has given in, he certainly cannot go against his father.'

‘It is unjust and cruel, and directly I am my own mistress I shall offer all my money to Percival. There will be enough to live on, I suppose.’ Sara began to be scornful.

‘Such wilfulness never ends in good. You can’t wish him to quarrel with his father. It would be very selfish of you.’

‘He will never give me up, I know it,’ said Sara; and she went to bed still believing that she and Percival were stronger than anyone else in the world.

But the next morning came Percival’s note. Though she knew that he acted on the highest principles, and though she felt there was no use fighting any more at present, she was deeply disappointed. She wrote only two lines in answer:

‘We will wait, Percival; but I think your father is cruel and unjust.’

Then Sara’s life made a new beginning.

Something good had gone out of her existence, and some new feeling of hatred crept in. The life of pleasure suddenly felt flat, and she followed her mother, generally accompanied by Mr. Greenwood, as if she were a ghost of her former self.

‘Would you like us to go to Chapel Stacey,’ said her mother one day. ‘We could hire the rectory, I hear, for the rector has gone abroad for his health. It is a lovely house, and that beautiful wood which belongs to it will be perfect now.’

‘Yes, oh yes, please let us go,’ said Sara. ‘I want to get away from here.’

‘Especially as your guardian tells me he is soon going to take a trip back to the mine.’

‘Then there is nothing left to care for in London,’ said Sara.

‘ But I shall ask Mr. Greenwood to pay us a visit.’

Sara answered nothing ; the romance of her life seemed ended.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CONSULTATION.

A FEW days after Lord Stretton's conversation with his son, as Clara was sitting up late in her bedroom, she heard a knock at the door. All that afternoon she had been collecting club-money amongst the poorest of the poor in the parish of St. Gabriel, and this gave her food for meditation. She had caught glimpses of wretched homes and of dirty dens, where life, in her sense of the word, seemed impossible, and now

she gazed upon the luxury which surrounded her with quite a new feeling of surprise. At Stacey all the cottages were comfortable and well built, and the poor people, at all events outwardly, were models of their class. Clara's habitual look of discontent was much softened as her brother came in.

'You have not gone to bed, Clara? May I have a few minutes' talk with you?'

'Yes, do come in. Oh! Percival, I think poverty is a dreadful thing.'

Percival smiled.

'Just now I'm thinking that to be rich is a worse calamity.'

'Nonsense!'

'I want to tell you my reason for thinking so. Will you listen, Clara?'

Clara was struck by Percival's tone of despondency. His nature was so sunny

that she had very rarely seen him depressed.

‘Of course I will. What is the matter? I wish you would sometimes confide in me. Mother told me everything, everything. Now I feel so lonely.’

‘Poor Clara! Did mother tell you everything? Yes, I know you find it awfully hard to live without her, but—Well, first about my own affairs.’

Then in as few words as possible he told his sister about Sara and about the probable end of his short dream of happiness.

‘So you fell in love the first time you saw her! How very strange.’

‘Yes, I know it is, but it’s true. We just suit each other, and she is——oh, it’s no use describing her. She’s just a girl you can trust down to the ground.’

‘ I am sorry, Percival. Let me speak to papa! Why should he stop it? Everybody else would say you were a lucky man—and if you like her——’

‘ Like her! but it’s no use, I can’t understand it. I think all the objections really come from her mother. She must be a worldly woman, and I expect she fancies we have not enough money. I suppose she looks still higher for Sara.’

‘ Vulgar woman!’

‘ Oh no, she is not vulgar at all. On the contrary, she is very refined and quite a lady, but somehow I can’t feel at my ease with her. I am sure that she did not like me. My poor Sara! Her mother says there is someone else most anxious to marry her.’

‘ Will she—will she be true to you?’ asked Clara, diffidently, for this was the

first romance that had touched her nearly.

‘ We are not to write or to see each other. How can I ask her to shut herself up all these months for my sake, and others will love her. They must.’

Percival stopped short, and then, as he slowly paced the room, Clara tried to find words of comfort but she could not.

‘ But when she is of age and comes in for all that money, surely she can please herself?’

‘ Yes, if before that time her mother—’

‘ Oh, then she isn’t worth having if she can’t be true to you.’

‘ She is devoted to her mother, and then she has such a joyous, sunny nature, how will she bear all this. The worst is that I am in honour bound not to go near to her.’

‘ Papa *must* listen to reason. He is so fond of you.’

‘ I don’t understand it, but there is another matter, Clara, about which I want to talk to you.’

‘ Sit down, Percival, I can’t listen to you if you tramp about.’

Percival obediently sat down in a low arm-chair.

‘ You say, dear, that mother told you everything, did she happen to tell you what she wished me to know before her death?’

Clara’s brow contracted.

‘ No, I don’t think she did. What was it?’

‘ I don’t know whether I ought to tell you, but father is anxious you should go abroad before going home and he wants me to take you.’

‘I hope you will; I won’t go with a stranger. I couldn’t bear it.’

‘That is just it. If my father would come too, then it would be easy, but I don’t like to leave him alone.’

‘Oh, he is going down to Stretton, he will be very happy pottering about there. He won’t miss *her* at every turn as I shall.’

‘No, but—— Clara, how can I tell you? I promised my mother not to leave him alone, because she believes that some woman will try and get hold of him—and I promised to guard him.’

Clara’s eyes grew larger.

‘Some woman? Who is she?’

‘I don’t know. She never told me, but evidently it is some one who came between them, I suppose. She made me promise that I would not leave him.’

‘That is why you didn’t go back to Oxford?’

‘Yes, and that is why I doubt about going with you. Why did I promise? A man has no right to put himself in such a position.’

‘Mother, of course, only meant that you were not to go off to the antipodes. Don’t you remember that you used to say that you would go to Australia as soon as you left Oxford?’

‘Was it only that? Do you think that I may go with you?’

‘Of course. What an idea! But about that woman! Look here, Percival, papa will certainly be safe at Stretton, for he could not invite any woman to come and stay with him whilst I am away, and there is nowhere in the village where she could lodge. We are such miles from even

Chapel Stacey. How strange it all is, though !’

‘This horrible promise weighs me down.’

‘Don’t say that, please ; mother *must* have had good reasons for saying what she did. Of course she had, but to make it doubly sure, I’ll tell Fuller to let no one come to the house in our absence. That will make you quite easy. I feel as if I cannot go back yet. Perhaps, when I have seen other places——’

‘Yes, yes ; then you give me leave, Clara ? Mother spoke so strongly that the scene haunts me.’

‘She *must* have dreaded the other woman very much. I am glad you have told me. There was some story, I know, about their marriage ; but, of course, we should be the last to know it.’

‘Don’t ask anyone. I would rather not know. Then I will come if you are sure——’

‘Yes, yes, let’s go to the Italian lakes. Mother always said you were to take me there some day.’

‘It seems impossible to be so near to Sara and yet to be forbidden to see her. It would be easier to bear if there was any sense in it. I say, Clara, I seem to have made a mull of the whole business.’

‘Poor Percival! It will come all right; you shouldn’t have fallen in love with a mine of wealth!’

‘I’m proud to think I fell in love with a penniless girl, no one can accuse me of that! I don’t care a farthing about her money.’

This conversation did good in one way, for it brought the brother and sister

nearer to each other. Clara brightened up, she felt once more of use to somebody, and she began to make active preparations for going abroad. She also began to study her father's wishes a little more, dimly conscious now of her deficient sympathy. She said to herself that when she came back she would try to be more cheerful, and to make his home more agreeable. She saw plainly in what a difficult position Percival was placed.

She even noticed a change in her father, he was so much more kind and considerate towards her, he went less to his club at night, and he seemed to prefer her society to that of Percival. That was perhaps natural, considering this unfortunate love-affair. Clara also began to have a certain curiosity about Percival's Sara, and expressed a wish

to see her, but this was of course now impossible.

The fortnight dragged on slowly enough for Percival. Whenever he dared, he would slink round by Sara's street in the hopes of a chance meeting, but chance seldom consents to have her hand forced. Two days before Percival's departure, when he returned home to tea, he found his father was still out, quite an unusual event, as Lord Stretton always made his appearance at that hour.

'Clara, I have found out something. The Beddoes are gone out of town.'

'Gone—and the season not over! How strange!'

'Yes, it is. I should have thought Mrs. Beddoes would have held on to the end if she has mercenary ideas for Sara; but it's true, the house is shut up, and I actually

had the courage to ring the bell and to interview an old caretaker. Strangely enough, she did not know where they were, or else she had orders to say so.'

'Orders to say so, of course. Their letters would have to be sent on,' said Clara, with a woman's quick instinct.

'They want to shelve me for good.'

'Poor old Percy! Never mind, patience for a few months, and all will end well.'

'I wish I had seen that honest Cobbin again. He, at all events, is as clear as glass.'

'Why, I saw in the paper to-day that Mr. Jethro Cobbin had started, or was starting, for Australia!'

'And Sara is left to her mother! I can't think why I have a feeling against

the woman. I wish you had seen her. Her eyes gave me an uncomfortable feeling as if a snake were fascinating me ; but many would call her a beautiful woman.'

'Don't you think you could get over it all? I wish you had never met the girl. Shall I talk to father about it before we go?'

'No, no, it would be useless. Anyhow, I must bear it like a man. When we get back to Stacey, I'll try and get news of her from Herringham Gwillian, but he is rather a rough diamond. It's no use talking of it. Have you got all your sketching materials ready, Clara? I shall try to take it up again. When we were young, you and I used to do a good deal of it. I shall take some books, but sometimes I feel as if I hated everything.'

Clara made up her mind to turn over a new leaf, and to devote herself to Percival. She was really a thoughtful, accomplished woman, but her mind had always been overshadowed by the domestic misery that had surrounded her, and she had never had time to develop.

When the day of departure arrived, Percival was glad to find that his father was going to take an early train to Stacey. Clara declared that there would be no danger then from the mysterious influence, and that on her return she would do all she could to help her brother. Anyhow, their father would not marry anyone under a year, and before that time he would be immersed in home duties. So she argued, as she thought, quite conclusively.

Percival's good-bye to his father was somewhat constrained. Both seemed glad

of the separation, though it was to be a short one. Indeed, that morning Clara Osborne looked the brightest of the two.

‘*Bon voyage,*’ said Lord Stretton, stepping into his carriage. ‘I shall await you at Stacey. Don’t think of me, I shall do very well.’

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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